

# “Church of Joy” theology—right here in St. Louis, Part II The ELCA

Colleagues,

Last week’s posting concluded with these words: It’s not just “them” in the LCMS. It’s also us, the ELCA crowd. We’ve got “mega-church-itis” too. Remember that “-itis” = infection. It’s here in ELCA congregations in St. Louis too.

## SEGUE

The newest ELCA church building in St. Louis is a mini-version of Community Church of Joy in Phoenix, Arizona—projection screens, bandstand, many mikes—the whole nine yards (well maybe four-and-a-half). Though we ELCA-ers regularly pooh-pooh the Missouri Synod for its uptight theology and awful attitudes about other Christians, we’re joining them with no reservations where it counts, where the rubber hits the road. We too want to “grow” our congregations. And for us too, as in Missouri (see last week’s posting), it’s “all very objective, based on statistics.” But the fundamental question remains: Where is THE Gospel in all this?

## CASE STUDY

Evidence for this came—again—on May 8 at the St. Louis “Lutheran Professional Church Workers Conference” [LPCWC], our ELCA crowd’s monthly get-together at one of our parishes. This time in one of the suburbs. Our liturgical focus was the upcoming 4th Sunday of Easter, Good Shepherd Sunday. The host congregation is known for its “postmodern worship . . . serving people who think traditional worship is boring.” So on that second Thursday in



May we did it their way. The band, the music, the “worship style” was what Marie and I had witnessed not too many weeks before at the Community Church of Joy in Phoenix, but in a mini-format.

But it’s not the “worship style” that rankles me. I can swing with “contemporary,” so I’m cool on that. Remember that as you read on: no complaint from me about that worship STYLE. My gripe about this “contemporary service” is the absence of Gospel, THE gospel, both in the songs we sang and (sadly) also in the sermon. The Eucharist saved us, for Christ’s promissory word WAS there.

For the remainder of this ThTh posting I propose NOT to discuss the sermon. [Well, perhaps just this much: Like the Epistle of James it was good law, giving us God’s own criticism. Stuff we needed to hear. But for coping with that criticism we got thin gruel. As I remember it was something like this: Jesus says: Don’t be so divisive. That’s a no-no. You’re s’posed to be “one flock.” So be one. What I do remember very clearly was that never once did the Good Shepherd’s own “grounding for oneness” in the John 10 sermon text, get mentioned. If not mentioned, then surely not used. You know it, his “laying down my life” (he says it 5 times) and his “taking it up again” (2 times). Yet it was a powerful sermon. But none of Christ’s new wine was offered.]

What I want to focus on in this posting is the songs we sang and the WINE inside those songs. [Forget, for now, the WINESKINS, the worship style. We may get back to that later.] To be blunt: the WINE of those songs was an “other” Gospel. In the overall liturgy we were still hyping Easter. In our songs there was no Easter-Gospel, but some “other” one. So next day I sent this e-mail to the worship leaders—all of them dear friends and great folks:



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Colleagues,

Perhaps you too noticed:

In the hymns we sang at the LPCWC liturgy the words “I, me, my” occurred 55 times. Compare that with the 28 Easter hymns in the Lutheran Book of Worship [LBW]. In 23 of those hymns, by my quick count, you never find any one of those words at all. In the 5 where you do, the total is 19 times. The hymn of the day yesterday surpassed that number all by itself—22 first person singular monosyllables. To cite an old question from Brother Martin: What does this mean? Wouldn’t that be a nitty-gritty topic for us to look at during next year’s LPCWC program?

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Two responded and thought I was complaining about “worship style.” One wondered if perhaps I was an organ nut and just hooked on “our wonderful, theologically correct hymns [which] proclaim in an intellectual, theological way, but mostly cold, staying in the head.” I was instructed: “That won’t cut it these days.” Then both of the responders made a case for being “contemporary” also in our hymnody.

I must have been too subtle by just asking what the numbers might mean. So one more time: I’ve got no gripe about contemporary styles. Even more, I think it’s in Christ’s mission mandates. I intended with those numbers to be talking about the wine, not the wineskins. The texts, not the tunes. Both of these dear folks also chided me for my “bean-counting” and reminded me how often the “I-bean” occurs in the 23rd Psalm and in Luther’s explanation of the creed in the Small Catechism. One song we sang was a new version of Psalm 23. That was the one with 22 I-beans. But I wasn’t just bean-counting. “I, me, my” are not dirty words for me.



*I was zeroing in on the message coming across in those songs. This does need more work, but here's my hunch. The ego-centric songs we sang signal the culture of America. Not just the wineskins of "with-it" music, but the wine of America's culture of narcissism. Narcissism is the Reformation definition for original sin—"incurvature into oneself." In our songs we were proclaiming narcissism as our faith and claiming to worship God thereby. In unending refrains we told God what "I am going to do." Here are a few we sent heavenward: "I will ever praise you...I will seek you...I will learn to walk in your ways...I will follow you...I want to praise you...I sing for joy...Forever I'll love you... Forever I'll stand... I am putting all my trust in you." That has to be an "other" Gospel, doesn't it?*

*How far away is that Pharisee in the famous parable with his "I-beans:" "God, I thank thee (yes those are his exact words!) that you have rescued me from all those evil alternatives so that I can praise you with my fasting, my alms, etc." Jesus' grim words after the Pharisee finishes his liturgy is that he didn't "go down to his house justified." Why? Narcissism, even when it's religious narcissism, is an other Gospel.*

*The total absence of the I-beans in those 23 LBW Easter hymns—and their paucity in the other 5—comes from the different Gospel in those hymns. Seems to me that it's plain to see by just comparing texts. It's not that these "old" Easter praise pieces are afraid to use first-person pronouns. When they show up, the first person pronouns come in different places, as they regularly do when you have different Gospels. That's no surprise.*

*What may strike some as surprising is that Luther can help. In his Galatians commentary Luther talks about "the grammar of the Gospel," as a really different grammar that follows when the Gospel is up front. Sentences—God-sentences and I-sentences—get*



structured differently from what otherwise passes as “normal” grammar in human speech. It’s really not that complicated. The Good News is not what we are doing for or about God, but what “God in Christ” is doing to, for, with us—in past, present, and future tenses. “Christ HAS died. Christ IS risen. Christ WILL come again.”

That’s THE Christian Gospel. That’s what WE need to hear. That’s what we’re called to sing about. That’s what our world needs to hear. Not how strong my faith and conviction is, but who The Strong One is on whom that faith is focused. And why he’s worth trusting. This “why he’s worth trusting” is a sine qua non. And why is that? Because to answer that why-worth-trusting question you’ve simply “gotta” talk about Good Friday and Easter, CHRIST’S Good Friday and Easter. You simply cannot let it go unmentioned, even worse, un-used, and still be doing Christian praise.

Back to bean-counting. Never once in all the songs we sang at that LPCWC liturgy does Christ’s cross and resurrection get mentioned. Never ever. Is that an “other” Gospel, or what? My one respondent short-shrifted the LBW “style” for Easter praise as “our wonderful, theologically correct hymns [which] proclaim in an intellectual, theological way, but mostly cold, staying in the head.” Argh! Yet even if that were true, what’s “theologically CORRECT” about songs with no cross, no risen Christ?

Of course, in the texts of the LBW Easter hymns we folks doing the singing do indeed appear with our pronouns. But it’s “us” in Gospel-grammar: most often in the plural, most often in the objective case. We’re on the receiving end of the sentences. That’s the grammar of first-person pronouns in Easter theology. The subject of sentences for Easter praise is not “I,” but the Risen Christ & the God who raised him. We ARE there in the



lyrics, but on the other side of the verbs. We're the receivers of the goodies. Our worship posture is faith's posture, the posture of receptivity.

And the plural is not insignificant. The body of Christ operates, as Elert says, on "the liturgical we." [Someday I ought to translate those paragraphs and pass them on to you.] So the great Easter hymns are "we" hymns, even if only one of us is singing. But in these Easter hymns "we" tell God blessed little of what all "we" are going to do for him. The Pharisee had it wrong—liturgically. He was telling God about himself, even if it was his pious self. He did not "go down to his house justified." Apparently the God who justifies thought that someone else had been worshipped in the Pharisee's praises. Little wonder. Narcissism is not a fruit of faith—and surely not any faith engendered by Easter.

Clean contrary are the last recorded words of Luther: "We are beggars. That's the truth." Luther is not doing the humble-bit here at the very end of his life. His words portray a posture, finally his worship posture. They are not words of despair. Such words keep us mindful—and then tell the world—where we stand. Namely, HERE we stand—on the receiving end of God's largesse. Like St. Paul when he starts boasting: "Look what God has done with a so-and-so like me!"

The beggar's posture is not to be sneered at. Remember, the tax-collector DID go down to his house justified after his liturgy from that posture. And we are called to do likewise—standing before God with open hands and expectant hearts and, if our mouths are moving, same-saying (= the literal meaning of "con-fessing") back to God—and then to the world—what God has said to us. God's talk always comes with God's own grammar: God the subject of the sentence, us at the end in the objective case. And if/when in our singing we do get



around to talking about ourselves—even when we say “I” or “We”—it’s palpably plural with “the posture of receptivity” patent in the pronouns.

That’s the “worship STYLE” of Gospel-grounded liturgy. It’s the only worship style that “fits”—for all the Sundays after Easter, and to the nines for worship on Ascension Day, the second-last segment of Easter.

Sample: A really “venerable” Ascension hymn from 700 A.D. [For LBW folk, number 157]

A hymn of glory let us sing!  
New hymns throughout the world shall ring.  
Alleluia!  
Christ, by a road before untrod [call it Good Friday],  
ascends unto the throne of God. Alleluia!

Is that “mostly cold, staying in the head?” Not in my head. From that opening verse the hype goes even higher.

And while you’re scanning other Ascension hymns, page back to the ancient Easter classic “Christ Jesus Lay in Death’s Strong Bands.” [LBW 134.] I’ll try to tease you into re-singing all of the stanzas by reprinting the text of the first:

Christ Jesus lay in death’s strong bands  
For our offenses given;  
But now at God’s right hand he stands  
And brings us life from heaven.  
Therefore let us joyful be  
And sing to God right thankfully  
Loud songs of hallelujah! Hallelujah!

Even though we get mentioned three times in that one verse,



*that's not Narcissus singing. That's New Creations singing. Make it personal: that's us. We're singing in Gospel grammar. Hallelujah indeed!*

*Peace & Joy!*  
*Ed Schroeder*

**P.S.** *About contemporary wineskins. Wineskins are not unimportant. But the Wine is absolutely important. The wine is where THE Truth is. "In vino veritas," the ancient Latins said. And in THIS wine it's both GRACE and TRUTH. Marshall McLuhan made a big splash a few decades ago with his "The Medium Makes the Message"—or something like that. In the case of the Gospel, however, it's the other way around. Or so Jesus claimed: New wine calls for new skins. Consequently it's the wine (message) that makes the wineskin (medium). That doesn't necessarily rule out any skin in advance, I'd guess, any "worship style." But it does say which of the two is the yardstick for the other. And it also alerts us to be suspicious of any wineskins our culture offers. Do they ever come to us empty? So that all we've got to do is fill them with the "good stuff"? I doubt it. So we must be wary. We need to check if our culture's alien wine (other gospel) is still in those contemporary wineskins—in this case—in the very music of our postmodern worship. For the LPCWC episode above I don't know enough about "contemporary" music to tell if the narcissist gospel in the lyrics has also seeped into the music itself. But those who do know should check it out for the rest of us—and even more—for the sake of THE Gospel.*

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# **“Church of Joy” theology—right here in St. Louis**

Colleagues, The feature article on Religion in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch for Saturday May 10 carried this headline: SYNOD AIMS TO SPREAD FORMULA FOR SUCCESSFUL CHURCHES. Sub-head: “Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod [LCMS] is starting a program where growing churches will serve as mentors for static churches.”

Major mentor in the program is the LCMS flagship mega-church in St. Louis, whose five services each weekend now bring in thousands where once there were but hundreds. The pastor is quoted as crediting their success to our “postmodern worship.” Which is described thus: “multimedia presentations in the sanctuary underline sermons and Scripture readings. A ‘praise’ band leads the music.”

LCMS president Kieschnick himself initiated the project. He’s sent letters to 240 LCMS congregations that have shown “growth.” Each of them will be trained to mentor 4 additional congregations. Kieschnick’s senior assistant says: “It’s all very objective, based on statistics.” Statistics found the 240 growing parishes. Statistics will carry through—like this: “If the plan works, one-fifth of all LCMS congregations will get mentoring. Both the mentoring parishes and those mentored will be audited for growth.” Audited for growth.. Hmmmm. As Luther says in the Small Catechism: “What does this mean?”

“Auditing” is a good word, literally “listening for.” Which then raises the question: What are you listening for? For growth? Why not listen, first of all, for FAITH, faith in the Gospel? Isn’t that what Christ himself was “listening for,” with his frequent words of commendation, “Great is thy faith!” There is



not a word here, of course, about the Gospel, or faith in that Gospel. Maybe you shouldn't expect Gospel-talk, faith-talk, in a secular newspaper. Yet the pastor of the St. Louis flagship church gets close to that subject when he says there's no "doctrinal aberration" here (I'm guessing he'd also call that "no Gospel aberration"), "we're just serving people who think traditional worship is boring." The formula is Missouri's 'same doctrine' in new wineskins. More about this below. Wouldn't it be something if LCMS "started a program where Gospel-grounded churches served as mentors for those that aren't?" Wouldn't it be something if the ELCA did that too? If all denominations did that?

I have never been on hand at this LCMS mega-church for worship. I need to do so. So I've never heard what kind of Gospel, what sort of "no doctrinal aberration" gets proclaimed there. [But you know that I'm suspicious. I wonder what sort of wine gets offered in those "postmodern" wineskins.] So I'll just stick to the Post-Dispatch article. The language coming from the LCMS headquarters in that story does not encourage. "It's all very objective, based on statistics."

Why didn't Jesus mention that in any of the "Mission Mandates" we have in the N.T. Gospels? There are three major ones: "Go and make disciples of all nations—baptizing . . . and teaching them what I have taught you." (Matthew) "That repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in My name to all nations." (Luke) "As the Father sent me, so send I you." (John)

In these primal mission axioms it's hard to find the LCMS one: "It's all very objective, based on statistics." Jesus seemsd not to know that the growth of the church, HIS body, was "all very objective, based on statistics." He did indicate that it might amount to a "little flock" and that "tribulation" might well be in the mix. But "poor statistics" was not one of them. Didn't he



even caveat a policy where “all folks speak well of you”? Not that he urged his ambassadors to be nasty. But the merchandise they were handling was bizarre. They were to invite folks to die—with Christ, of course—in order to live again. What are the statistical projections for such a venture? In any age? If the growth of the Body of Christ is “all very objective, based on statistics,” then Jesus’ own un-success does not fit the formula. He needed the mentoring that the LCMS program will provide.

Once more, this is not a pitch for un-success in mission outreach. Not reverse statistics: smaller is better. It’s urging outreach, while asking what are you offering in that outreached hand. Of course, I’m skeptical about what the LCMS offers “officially” with its outreached hand. Still within the memory of some of you readers (but not of others since it was 30 years ago) is the LCMS hand that reached out and pitched out of the LCMS 45 of us seminary professors. And the verdict was that the Gospel we were teaching was “not to be tolerated in the church of God, much less be excused and defended.” That verdict about “aberrant doctrine,” our intolerable Gospel, was never rescinded. In church politics it’s hard to envision how that might ever happen.

Yet checking for aberrant Gospels is very worth doing. Comes on recommendation from The Chief Himself. And the first one to check is the one you are promoting. Missouri excels in measuring the Gospels of other folks—and “other Gospels” do indeed abound. Their name is legion. But that’s also true in Missouri, as we’ve seen these past months in the LCMS brouhaha about “praying with pagans.” Although the alleged villain has now been juridically vindicated, the alligators are not stopping. So which Gospel, whose Gospel, is the errorless one and which one is “aberrant?” It’s a very intra-Missouri question. And everywhere else too—in all the churches.



Missouri's "objective statistics" program is bad enough, but adding salt to the wounds is the information in the news story about who is paying for this. Guess. It's THRIVENT, the newly merged fraternal insurance company created from the earlier Aid Association for Lutherans and Lutheran Brotherhood, the former "mostly Missouri," the other "mostly those other Lutherans."

Guess what the price tag is. Four Hundred Thousand Dollars! 400K! Marie and I now have three policies in that outfit! So our nickel or dime is bankrolling this LCMS venture into new wineskins with no evident concern for the wine! We're thinking about pulling our money out. Other thoughtful policy-holders might think about it. To us it's a case of putting your money where your Gospel is—and not putting it where the Gospel ain't.

Yet it's not just "them" in the LCMS. It's also us, the ELCA crowd.

We've got "mega-church-itis" too. Remember that "-itis" = infection. It's here in our ELCA congregations in St. Louis too, though none of ours is anywhere near as mega as the LCMS flagship one. In ELCA congregations, too, "static" is the status quo. Numbers are not increasing. Many of us are "running scared." It's a matter of survival.

The LCMS formula in that news story is what some ELCA congregations around here are following too. We ELCA-ers regularly distance ourselves from the LCMS, especially from its gosh-awful claim to be "THE true church." Despite that, we're joining them where it counts, where the rubber hits the road. We too want to "grow" our congregations—as the new lingo puts it—"all very objective, based on statistics." For us too, Wine-testing—checking for THE Gospel—in all this gets precious little attention. It's a given, taken for granted. "Of course, we're OK on the Gospel. No problem there. Why do you even raise the



question?"

So "Lord, increase our faith" is not prominently prayed. It's "Lord, grow our church."

More about our local ELCA infection next time—a case study.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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## Christians in Time of War—Hitler's Germany, Today's America

Colleagues,

Art Preisinger's prose has appeared here before. The ThTh postings for May 28 and November 14, 2002 came from his hand. Those two ThTh postings focused on Christians relating to the Muslim World. Art was embedded there at the time, doing a stint in Beirut (Lebanon) teaching Church History at the Near East School of Theology. Today's item from him pick up on his "official" turf in church history, Christians during the time of Hitler's Third Reich. So I asked him to think out loud about "Christians in Time of War: Hitler's Germany, Today's America." Officially retired—well, sortuv—Art and wife Mitzi have their home in Sequin, Texas. Here's what he says. Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder



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*I imagine that ThTh #252 regarding the war against Iraq may have gotten flack from some of your readers. That happens when Caesar is powerful and appeals not only to the loyalty, but also to the fears of his subjects. I'm not sure we're in a "post-Constantinian" era yet. Not around my neck of the woods anyway. [Note: "Constantinianism" = technical term for welding the State to Christian religion. Implemented by Constantine—A.D. 313ff.—for the Roman Empire. It's supposedly passeé nowadays in the secularized Western World, where we are said to live in a "post-Constantinian" age. But not yet in Texas, Preisinger says.] I was reminded of this last July 4, when our town put on its annual Independence Day parade. We're in the southwestern end of the Bible Belt, so I was not surprised, but rather appalled at the sight of two floats, one sponsored by a church and the other by a civic organization, with large crosses wrapped in American flags. Constantine lives! In hoc signo vinces. [Constantine's motto: In this sign (the cross) you shall conquer.]*

*We have a Lutheran University here and quite a few Lutheran pastors have retired in the area to take advantage of it. Many of them meet weekly over breakfast at a local restaurant. If they had read #252, I think most of those brothers would have been quite offended by it and would probably question your patriotism. And I have learned that a retired bishop, heretofore a regular attendee, has now quit the breakfast group because he is pretty much out of sync with a majority of the brothers. So it is that Caesar has managed to create a house divided against itself.*

*There are those who draw parallels between the present administration and Nazism. I am not one of them, although it is difficult not to think of Josef Goebbels when I see Ari*



*Fleischer on TV and hear his spin on the Bush policies and activities.*

*Nevertheless, I do find similarities between the "Evangelical Church" [= German designation for Protestants, both Lutheran and Reformed] in Hitler's Third Reich and American nationalistic theology. In Germany it was called "political theology."*

*The main Protestant response to the extreme nationalism which Hitler represented ranged from inactive indifference to overwhelming support. True, the Confessing Church [Protest movement of Lutheran and Reformed Christians linked to the Barmen Confession of 1934] did display a courageous, though not always consistent, opposition. But at best it never spoke for more than one-tenth of all Protestant Christians. For the predominant number of Lutherans, for major Lutheran church leaders and theologians, National Socialism was a temptation and a crisis which they were not able to meet successfully.*

*Why would Lutherans give such whole-hearted support to the National Socialists? Not just any government could find such favor; after all, the Lutheran response to the Weimar Republic [German government following WWI] had been less than lukewarm in contrast to the widespread acclaim of Hitler.*

*There were many reasons for this support, not the least of which was the defeat of World War I and a deep-seated nationalistic frustration. Emmanuel Hirsch, a leading Lutheran church historian, gave expression to this mood in 1925: "We were a nation of rank, a noble people, maybe the most flourishing and best of all. We stand in danger of being destroyed as a people. . . This fate is truly terrible, it contradicts everything we can achieve for humanity."*

*I hear echoes of this today as the present war, the Gulf War of*



10 years ago, the invasion of Panama, and the invasion of Grenada somehow has made up for the demoralizing defeat in Vietnam. We are No. 1 again! One of our newspaper columnists declared, in a fit of great fervor or complete loss of sanity, that a real positive accomplishment of the (Iraqi) war was that it re-established "the truly proud tradition of America's military." This war may not be something we can achieve for humanity, but we are told it will mean great achievement for the Middle East. The trouble is, I hear that kind of talk from good Christian folk who should know better.

As you know, Ed, it was the so-called "Deutsche Christen" (literally, German Christians) who wanted to develop a close working relationship with Hitler since they thought their aims coincided with National Socialism. Hitler used them when it suited him, but he really felt nothing but contempt for the Protestants, mostly because of their theological squabbles. In some ways the Deutsche Christen compare with the ultra-conservative Protestants of the present day – led by the Jerry Falwells, the Pat Robertsons, the Franklin Grahams, et al. The German Christians affirmed the false ideology of the Nazi world view and approved the false theology of Point 24 of the Nazi party program that preached a "positive Christianity."

"Positive Christianity," like a wax nose, could be twisted in various way to mean almost anything "religious." In the twentieth century it meant a religiosity that was vague and undoctrinal, like "practical" Christianity, which meant a focus on love of neighbor, social welfare, etc. It was a favorite "proof text" of Deutsche Christen to substantiate the claim that Nazism was, at bottom, a "Christian" movement.

Another important aspect of this kind of Christianity was the concept of "Volk," the German "people." State and church belong together as the two great ordering powers of a Volk. (God bless



America.) Sometimes radical Deutsche Christen substituted "Volk" for the N.T. term "logos." So instead of race or Volk being the object of God's creative activity, they become the instruments of it. A theological candidate named Kunze said, unchallenged, in the presence of Bishop Coch of Saxony: "In the beginning was the Volk, and the Volk was with God, and the Volk was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made through it, and without it was not anything made that was made."

The Confessing Church fought the Deutsche Christen on theological and ecclesial grounds. [Ed: this has gone down in history as the "Kirchenkampf" (Church-fight). Not the church's fight against Hitler, but the conflict within the church. The issue: Was Hitler in synch with the Christian faith, or was he not? Consequently the technical language of the 16th century Reformation, "status-confessionis" (roughly: we're on the witness-stand) and "tempus confessionis" (it's time to confess) was used. Not primarily confessing contra Hitler, but contra other Christians who said: "Hitler is in synch with the Christian faith."] Thereby the "Confessing" Church indirectly fought against Hitler, although most confessing churchmen denied it.

I would hope that, like the Confessing Church, Christians today would reject the false theology of the religious right, with its uncritical acceptance of American adventurism, its equating America with Christianity, its misguided millennialism, and its arrogant certitude.

Still it was not only the Deutsche Christen who fell under the spell of Nazism. The great majority of Protestants succumbed to the false promises of Hitler and National Socialism. "Destiny," "turning point," "Germany's hour," "hour of the people," "hour of the present" – this kind of terminology was common among the



theologians and leaders of the Evangelical Church, including the non-German Christians. A member of the central committee of the Lutheran World Convention [founded in 1923, predecessor to the Lutheran World Federation of 1947ff.], said that the church's course should be clear and unambiguous in relation to the political situation. This meant that Christ was to be identified with the political right, anti-Christ with the left.

The identification of Christ with the right and anti-Christ with the left was prevalent in the period just before the Nazi seizure of power. There were counter-voices, but they were few and lonely. One such was the author of "Tagebuch eines Grossstadtpfarrers" [Journal of an Urban Pastor]: "Where has the church proclaimed God's wrath on the breaking of the treaty against the Belgians? Treaty-breaking always brings God's wrath, God's judgment after it. . . . What do we do with the cross these days? We wear its wood as a brooch on the chest, hang it as a flag out of the window, use it as a bookmark. Jesus Christ broke under the weight of the cross. . . . The worst insolence is this, that the Stahlhelm [=Steel Helmet, a paramilitary group] leaders hand out the cross as an award to their members. . . . that a political, purely secular club awards crosses, that testifies not only to unbelieving arrogance, but also to a full misunderstanding of Christianity."

Crosses wrapped in flags. "God bless America." We need to beware of the easy identification of our Christian faith with national policies and goals. But I hear it all around me. We need to disabuse ourselves of the fear that makes us willing to believe that, like those in the Third Reich, a leader, a Fuehrer, and armed might can protect us from the terrors of the world – instead of the Lord Christ. We need to concentrate on the cross, instead of the false promise of political and ecclesial glory.



*"O God, from whom all holy desires, all good counsels, and all just works proceed, give to your servants that peace which the world cannot give, that our hearts may be set to obey your commandments, and also that we, being defended by you from the fear of our enemies, may pass our time in rest and quietness; through the merits of Jesus Christ, our Savior, who lives and rules with you and the Holy Spirit, ever one God, world without end."*

*Art Preisinger*

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*Postscript. Two recent Letters to the Editor of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. [#1 from Mike Hoy, #2 from yours truly.]*

- 1. Here's a thought-provoking quote from Hermann Goering (Hitler's right hand man) in Gustav Gilbert's NUREMBERG DIARY (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1947) pp. 278-9."Naturally the common people don't want war. But after all it is the leaders who determine the policy. And it is always a simple matter to drag the people along, whether it is a democracy, or a fascist dictatorship, or a parliament, or a communist dictatorship. Voice or no voice, the people can always be brought to do the bidding of the leaders. That is easy. All you have to do is tell them they are being attacked, and denounce the pacifists for lack of patriotism and exposing the country to danger. It works the same in every country."*
- 2. "Preemptive strike" is the root meaning for the word "murder" in the Bible. In the first recorded event outside of Eden (Genesis 4) Cain murders Abel. It's a preemptive strike to eliminate someone Cain perceives as a threat to his own existence. God diagnoses Cain's strike against Abel as symptom of Cain's even deeper dilemma, his own un-faith, the same malady that got his*



parents evicted from Eden. God “curses” Cain for his lethal preemptive strike. Though Abel is now dead, Cain gets no peace. The threat-factor in his life soars. It’s now threat with a capital T. Under God’s curse his life is a living hell.

Preemptive strike is now the official policy of our country. We should not expect our national life to improve. We’re in trouble. In the “don’t murder” commandment, God makes it perfectly clear.

A “Non Sequitur” cartoon published recently in your newspaper said the same thing. It hit like a 2-by-4. A military officer appears before the divine bench holding up his sign “God is on our side.” The deity responds: “Um . . . Which part of ‘Thou shalt not kill’ didn’t you understand?”

God “bless” America? The verb in the Genesis text for God’s response to Cain is the grim opposite of “bless” for preemptive strikers. And if that is true, the deeper diagnosis of the trouble facing our nation these days comes with a capital T. Curse is not God’s last word for preemptive strikers, Cain included. But it doesn’t just fade away on its own.

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## **Gospel and Community Church of**



# Joy [CC0J], Part 2

Colleagues,

Last week's posting on the topic above drew the most response ever for ThTh. Seven percent of our (admittedly not too huge) listserve-receivers wrote back. Here are a few of them. Some of you asked for more particulars on the CC0J sermon. I'll reprint the sermon outline page with fill-in-the-blanks in the worship folder: [Bracketed info thereafter from me indicates preacher's words for filling in the blanks, plus other items from my notes.]

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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*March 16, 2003*

*Message by Pastaor Walt Kallestad*

*Psalm 13:1-6*

*"Battling the Enemies of Joy"*

*I. THE BANDIT OF JOY – \_\_\_\_\_'s  
story*

*[Black Bart, notorious Wells Fargo bandit of 1835 who  
terrorized stage-coach travellers]*

*II. ENEMIES OF JOY*

*1. \_\_\_\_\_ "Oh Lord, how long will you  
forget me? Forever?"  
[Forgetfulness]*

*2. \_\_\_\_\_ "How long must I struggle with  
anguish in my soul, with sorrow in my heart*



everyday?"

[Sorrow]

3. \_\_\_\_\_ "Turn and answer me, Oh Lord my God! Restore the light to my eyes or I will die!"  
[Darkness]

### III. THE BEAUTY OF JOY – \_\_\_\_\_'s story

[Young woman whose lying to her parents ended in a near-death disaster. How did she survive? "Prayer. God. You guys here at CCOJ. God there for me. My trust in God."]

### IV. FRIENDS OF JOY

1. \_\_\_\_\_ "I trust in your unfailing love."  
[Trust in God]
2. \_\_\_\_\_ "I will rejoice because you have rescued me."  
[Rejoice. Story of Robert Reed who led 70 people to Christ.]
3. \_\_\_\_\_ "I will sing to the Lord because He has been good to me."  
[Singing. Illustrated with Beverly Sills' story: "Because God is my Savior, I have decided to live with joy."]

[Conclusion: Jesus Christ was mentioned (but no cross and resurrection) as we were exhorted to move from timid joy-less hearts to "the heart of a champion," since "the heart of a champion allows Jesus Christ to come into your heart."]

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## READER RESPONSE TO ThTh 255

### 1. A Petroleum Cyber-Scientist in Colorado:

CCOJ IS SELF-REPLICATING, IN OUR CONGREGATION TOO. Your latest Thursday Theology did prompt an immediate response, primarily because we are currently struggling with Community of Joy ideology in our own congregation.



*You were much too kind to Kallestad et al. The problem is not primarily the message proclaimed on March 16 (or any other Sunday for that matter) at the Community of Joy.*

*The primary problem is that the Community of Joy is vigorously promoting what they do as the model for the church of the 21st century. They offer an extensive series of seminars and classes for pastors and lay leaders to promulgate this model and take it back to their own congregations. (Which may explain Pastor Kallestad's somewhat rote reply to you: you were not only critiquing his performance as a pastor, you implicitly posed a threat to what I'm sure is a pretty lucrative franchise, bringing in revenues in at least the six figures annually.)*

*I view these seminars somewhat akin to the temptation of Jesus at the beginning of his ministry. I presume Pr. Kallestad takes the visiting pastors to some high point on the Community of Joy "campus" and asserts that they could have this too, if only they take a few more of the programs Community of Joy offers. Unfortunately all too many of our pastors have neither the relationship to the Father nor the knowledge of scripture that Jesus employed against Satan.*

*Anyway, I offer these musings to you as a former seminary professor to reflect on the dominance of Community of Joy type programs for the continuing education of our pastors (I would refer to it more as their seduction), particularly when the Community of Joy cannot even get the Gospel right themselves.*

*On that cheery note, peace.*



## 2. Someone Unknown to Me:

KUDOSGreatly appreciated your commentary on the worship experience and the gospel. I needed that for my own thinking.

Applaud the Socrates-like response you took to the situation. Thanks for waking up my own reflective skills on what goes across my pulpit – what theology and gospel goes forth, what the people have to go forth on.

## 3. Another Person Unknown to Me

REPRIMANDI would like to make a couple of comments about your worship experience in Arizona, briefly...As to the accuracy of your observations about the sermon and worship service, you may be right on target (speaking the truth). But as you ripped these brothers to shreds, even as you claimed to have a pastoral concern on their behalf, I saw little or no evidence of love in your tone.

When a worship experience involves thousands of people, each at a different place in the journey of faith, the likelihood of being right on target personally is small—about like the odds of a fly ball to left field being hit directly into the fielder's glove without any movement necessary. In your case their style is so far removed from your hermeneutical frame of reference that without a great deal of hustle you would have difficulty fielding the ball on the first bounce.

Perhaps Christ might become visible to eyes that explain a brother's actions (and proclamation) in the kindest way. And, if a pagan who doesn't even know God can serve as his anointed, how much more might one ordained in his name become Christ to those around him—even if his verbage seems incongruent with our understanding of the



words of the Word made flesh. Peace.

4. An ELCA pastor in Oregon

A GROWING PROBLEMWow! I just read your exchange with Walt K. and I commend you in your effort to confront a growing problem in our church today: what is the gospel we preach? Clearly, and I have been to Community of Joy, the Gospel is being preached or a gospel is being preached in a manner that is no longer acceptable in the church today. A few years back the Community of Joy offered a seminar, and unfortunately I cannot remember the title, which, in essence proclaimed that the church must conform to the culture. Both [x] and I bristled at the title as well as the intended content. We are in the world, but not of the world. Yet Walt, especially in his lack of response to your 2nd letter, is not willing to engage in the type of conversation the so-called Church-Growth Movement desperately needs.

5. A Southern "Lady" and ThTh fan—most of the time

SUCH A LICKIN' IN PUBLICI thought you might have just taken those boys to the woodshed and not given them such a lickin' in public. I read your postings religiously. (dreadful pun!!, but irresistible). You always keep that focus square on the Good News and don't let us get sidetracked. Generally I agree and especially enjoy hearing what Christians around the world are dealing with. The posts from Jerusalem were very disturbing. But disturbing in a good way. Thought-provoking way. I will wait with bated breath to see how the boys from Joy Church take their lickin'.

Now here is the Armchair Theologian take on all this: Some say that "if they aren't against us, they are for us," but I think these non-'crucified-risen-Christ'



talkers who claim the name of Christ are far more destructive than the Feng Shui-ers, or Wiccans, or other high profile non-christian groups. As I read your exchanges I was pounding my Armchair and saying yeah, yeah- that's just what I would have written if I had been a Real Lutheran Theologian.

6. An ELCA Pastor in Georgia.

I'VE WANTED TO WRITE SUCH A RESPONSEI commend (and thank) you for your response/s to the CC0J crowd. I have wanted to write such a response (based on reading of articles and books & CC0J lit.) for years but didn't feel that it would come off right. Your response was right on and I am so grateful to you for doing it. I am sorry that Walt took it personally. No need to have done that. It could have been a good discussion. But you see, Ed, your giving them/him the benefit of the doubt was probably much too generous. I see a lot of what goes on at CC0J as opportunism, manipulation and ego-building (primarily for those running the show).

7. Theology Prof at a Lutheran University

THEOLOGICAL CURMUDGEONRY APPROVEDWhile you may have outdone yourself in theological curmudgeonry, the resolute way in which you have tried to keep Walt Kallestad's feet in the fire about the nature of the gospel is exactly on target. Every other debate or argument I've seen or heard about with WK has been about style and liturgy and music, and not about the substance of the "gospel" actually proclaimed and/or enacted [sacramentally] – if I can keep on taking Augsburg Confession VII literally). What your debate with WK accomplishes is to (try to) keep secondary matters secondary, and to focus on the gospel said and done in that assembly. And it is on that (sola?) that AC VII



rests its defining of any assembly as "church." [Info note: AC 7 says that what turns any group of people into "church" is when THE Gospel is preached in their midst, and the sacraments are administered among them in congruence with THAT Gospel.]

8. ELCA Pastor in Wisconsin

LIVES ARE CHANGEDGreat job of sniffing out his justification, "lives are changed" and coming straight back with the challenge, Muslim Imams' and Jewish rabbis' sermons also change lives (not to mention plain old motivation speakers, who probably have a better batting average than any of us sermon-givers, gospel-preachers included) but if the Gospel is not the means to the change (and WK conspicuously did NOT say "You caught me on an off week, usually the cross is at the center of what I teach") then is it really the change the Holy Spirit engineers, or something far less salutary (as in Acts 4:12)?

9. A Filipino Lutheran Pastor

TOUCHE' ON "REPRESENTS"I have heard sermons like the ones delivered by Walt and Tim and personal testimonies given by that woman. They are entertaining especially if the speaker (s) are good. However, we are called to preach the Good News not just any news no matter how good. We are not called to entertain people. I bet you there was not much real law either. Perhaps, Walt and Tim felt that there is already too much gospel in the hymns and in the liturgy. We thank God that it is there but our mandate is to proclaim the Gospel. As a Filipino we would not make public the kind of letter you wrote. We would rather write a private letter to both of the men.

The bread and wine do not represent the body and blood of Christ. Our forgiveness through this sacrament is not a symbol or representation of Christ's forgiveness for us.



*It's real forgiveness. But I can't fault Walt and Tim for using the word, "represent." Isn't the ELCA in "full" communion with the United Church of Christ and the Reformed Church?*

*On another note, I wonder why preachers that preach a diluted law and Gospel gain a lot more hearers than those who proclaim the law in all its severity and the Gospel in all its sweetness?*

*This reminds me of a funny thing. I had a student [when I was a seminary prof] by the name of Fermin Satan. He became a Lutheran by taking the course Fundamentals of the Christian Faith offered by the Lutheran Hour. He gathered his friends and relatives and taught them what Lutheran Christians believe. Then the group asked for a missionary. When the missionary visited this mountain village, he found a ready congregation. After several weeks of visit the missionary confirmed Fermin Satan and all those whom he taught. Our Lutheran newspaper headlined the event thus, "Satan Now A Lutheran." Then Fermin went to the seminary. A few months before graduation he went to court and asked that his last name be changed to Capangpangan. He said he doesn't want to introduce himself as "Pastor Satan." His seminary classmates tried hard to dissuade him from changing his last name. Their reason: Satan can win more followers. Is the road to perdition really wider than the road to heaven? This is a true story. Fermin is now retired and back in his mountain village. Keep preaching the Gospel.*

#### *10. ELCA Pastor in Montana*

*BRAVO! I find myself becoming weary of the baseless joy "laughtrack" that is junk food passed off as meaty Gospel! The seminars colleagues attend in Phoenix bring*



them back charged up for growth in their congregations, but I have yet to see the sustained growth that is fueled by the Gospel of Christ Crucified and Risen. I'm forwarding your correspondence with Walt to several in our neck of the tundra. I'll let you know what, if any, response I receive from them.

11. LCMS Pastor in Nebraska

SWALLOWING A CAMEL Thank you!! "Church growth" and "megachurch" preaching, a la Community of Joy, not to mention all the other kinds of "other gospel" preaching out there (not that there IS an other gospel!), has been plaguing the church for some time, actually for 2K years. I'm thankful for your parsing, and you did it more charitably than I would have. We've got one of these kinds of churches in our metro area, and it concerns me no end what they're feeding people. What galls me is how our district (and synod) seems to swallow such a camel, and harp on people's gnats. Jerome Burce is right—good preaching (Gospel preaching) is the antidote. But few there be who are willing to dance that jig.

We get all kinds of mailings from CCoJ, and other parishes of their ilk, offering all kinds of "help" to us clueless folk who've been diagnosing and prognosing with the crucified/risen Christ all our ministry. To paraphrase a saint from early Acts, I say to them, "You and your help can go to hell." Pax et Gaudium.

12. A Methodist pastor in Phoenix. She was once a Crossings Student in St Louis.

A BETTER OFFER HAD YOU COME TO OUR CHURCH Ed, You should have visited our church (UMC, but Christian, nonetheless) on that Sunday instead of going to "Community of Joy." When our pastors serve communion, they don't mince words.



*They say "This IS my body!" Peace and Joy.*

*13. An ELCA Bishop*

*YOU ARE KIND OF CROTCHETY AT TIMES! Thanks for the exchange between you and Walt Kallestad—though you are kind of crotchety at times! What I really appreciate is the clear formation in the Gospel. I know I don't always get it right when I preach or teach or write and I am probably my own worst critic. But I know it when I hear it, and I miss it when I don't! I am thankful my own pastor, (X), is an excellent preacher, well-grounded and not ashamed of proclaiming the Gospel.*

*14. A Luth. Pastor in Melbourne, Australia*

*THANKS FOR THE REMINDER Dear Brother Ed, From this humble Lutheran pastor in Melbourne's western suburbs, thank you for reminding me of what I can never be reminded too much of in your TT 255. Blessings & Shalom*

*15. A Retired LCMS Pastor in Virginia*

*EXEMPLARY CONGREGATIONS I was joyful over your response to the pastors of the Community of Joy in Phoenix. I thought your comments were most appropriate. In fact, you overwhelmed me with your direct, Scriptural critique of the sermon.*

*What bothers me is how a congregation can grow to have 12,000 members IF THIS IS A TYPICAL EXAMPLE OF THE THEOLOGY PROCLAIMED AT THAT PLACE. (Like you, I realize it is perhaps wrong to judge a pastor on the basis of only one sermon.) On second thought, I do know how that is possible: the theology of glory appeals to the natural man.*

*But the situation becomes more complicated when you realize that the Community of Joy seems to be one of the exemplary congregations of the ELCA. We have the same problem in the LCMS. The congregation to which I used to*



*belong is now a “poster “congregation of the LCMS Southeastern District, if not of the whole LCMS. The pastor is sold on the church growth movement. And, like the Community of Joy, people are coming to it in droves. It is difficult to argue with numerical success.*

*It seems our contemporary god is “growth,” not “faithfulness.” Thank you for being faithful to the tradition passed down to us.*

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## **Which Gospel Creates a “Community of Joy?”**

Colleagues,

A few weeks ago Marie and I were in Phoenix AZ. Sunday rolled around. Where to go for “church?” Easy decision. The Community Church of Joy, flagship mega-church of the ELCA—12 thousand members and a 360 acre “campus.” We knew it only from the hearing of the ear. Now we would participate, see it “live.” Our host, Harvey Stegemoeller, at whose home we were staying (also a co-confessor during the Preus Wars of the 1970s) took us there. Below you have our “report.” Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder



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March 21, 2003

Pastors Kallestad & Wright

Community Church of Joy

Phoenix, AZ

Dear Walt, Dear Tim,

Marie and I attended the 9:35 service last Sunday (March 16, 2003). Harvey Stegemoeller introduced us to you, Walt, after the service. Yesterday (Mar. 20) we returned home to St. Louis, and I want to address this right away.

The gist of my comments below is that although the two of you were leading us in worship on the theme "Battling the Enemies of Joy," I think you succumbed to the enemies. And I imagine you do not believe me when I say that.

To be more pointed, your words in leading us in worship did NOT bring joy to Christ. If he were listening in—as he claims to be present where two or three are gathered in his name—he may have wept, as he did over Jerusalem. Jerusalem did not bring him joy even though it thought that what it was doing was pleasing to God. Ditto for the Community of Joy 9:35 service.

Here's why I say that:

First off, Tim.

Your words about the Lord's Supper were in clear contradiction to the words we have verbatim from Christ. And ironically you contradicted Christ immediately after you quoted him correctly as you spoke the words of institution for the Lord's Supper: "This IS my body, this IS my blood." And then immediately thereafter as you invited us worshippers to receive, you gave us a second opinion (apparently your own): "The bread REPRESENTS Christ's body; the grape-juice(!) REPRESENTS



*Christ's blood."*

*I trust that as a rostered ELCA pastor, you're aware that "half" of the Reformation conflict in the 16th century was fought over your "re-write" of Christ's promissory words in the Lord's Supper. Zwingli claimed REPRESENT, Luther claimed IS, and made a powerful case for "IS" as the Good News that brings Joy in the sacrament. Which side are you on? Does no one call you to account for this? Not only is this a clear contradiction of the Lutheran Confessions on which you most likely took an ordination vow, once upon a time, but also it contradicts what the "Foundations of Our Faith" folder says about Community Church of Joy in its section on the Lord's Supper. The word there is IS, not REPRESENTS.*

*The issue is not "mere words," of course, but Christ's word of promise to BE there in the bread and wine for forgiveness of sins, life and salvation. If there is no "IS," then there is no Gospel, no forgiveness of sins, life and salvation. And that means no Joy, the sort of Joy Christ wants communicants to have. Also no Joy for Christ with your re-write of his promise. What on earth prompts you to do that?*

*Despite your contradicting Christ's word in inviting us to receive, Marie and I opted to trust Christ's own words—and disbelieve yours—and so we received the sacrament.*

*For you, Walt—and I'm not just a crotchety curmudgeonly old griper—I try in vain to see how Christ himself found any joy in your sermon. I don't say that with glee, but with sorrow.*

*Simple reason for saying that is this: Christ's cross and resurrection were never mentioned once in your message to us. And if not even mentioned, therefore not "needed" to get us to the joy you were commending. I'm pretty confident that you don't actually believe that, but that is what you proclaimed to*



us. Any proclamation of “Joy” (or peace, or faith, or hope, or love) that doesn’t NEED Christ crucified and risen to get the hearers to that joy (or peace, or faith, or hope, or love), is NOT the Christian Gospel. In the words of St. Paul (Galatians) it is an “other” Gospel. In keeping with the theme of the day, Christ was robbed of Joy, and we in the pews got robbed too. In Paul’s Galatian language, “then Christ died for no purpose.”

I listened hard for Christ-grounding in the joy you were preaching to us, and it was absent. In fact, Christ’s name only got mentioned a couple of times, usually as a synonym for God, and then at the end as you urged us to take Christ into our hearts because “your relationship to Christ” is the basis for joy. True, but that’s not yet preaching the Gospel of Christ so that folks GET such a relationship, and as spin-off from that get the joy that the NT speaks of. The NT is unanimous that the only way to escape the enemies of the joy of our salvation and regain that joy is—again as Paul says to the Corinthians—to “preach Christ crucified (and risen).” You never mentioned this explicitly CHRISTIAN Good News. How come? How come some “other” Gospel?

When Chareen (is that her name?) then came to the mike to tell her story [“The Beauty of Joy” in your printed outline] she too gave Christless witness. And you commended her to us as a powerful example of Christian Joy. In the conversation with her you once even asked her a “Christ-related” question, but she didn’t follow your lead. She didn’t speak of Christ and didn’t need to mention his name (or his cross and resurrection) to continue her story. Lots of God-talk, sure, but “generic God talk” is not Christian. Jews do it, so do Muslims. Lots of other folks too. And her confession at the end: “Turn to God. If you put all your trust in God, everything will turn out all right” is not the confession commended by the NT. I’m guessing that you know that such a confession is also the confession of



Muslims. Yes, she did admit that she had sinned by lying to her parents. Yet to talk about God and even God's forgiveness, but never confessing Christ, the very grounds for God's mercy to sinners, is Islam or Judaism, but not the Christian faith.

I'm confident that you do not believe that "Christ died in vain," so why did you proclaim to us a joy that didn't need to be grounded in Good Friday and Easter?

Sure, every preacher can have a "bad" day, but to hear at the Community of Joy a sermon on joy that bypassed Christ is jolting. If any congregation ought to have "joy" right, it should be one that calls itself by that name. I once taught homiletics. Christ-less sermons were frequent. They still are. When students handed in such a sermon, it got returned with these comments: "Still needs a little work in order to pass as Christian proclamation—and I know you want to be preaching Christ's good news to your hearers."

One possible resource for you last Sunday to get Christ into the center of your sermon on joy could have been the lectionary Gospel for the day, but that was not part of the service, sorry to say.

Before Harvey Stegemoeller introduced us to you we overheard you and him talking about your recent medical trauma. I'm a firm believer in God giving us signs. Perhaps you are too. Heart problems for preachers might be a signal from Christ that they need to refocus on the "heart" of the Gospel, which is also the heart of Christian joy. A quick concordance check of the word in the NT makes it perfectly clear that the Christian joy arises always and only from the crucified and risen Messiah. Any joy grounded elsewhere comes from some other source, some "other" gospel.

In preaching from an OT text (Psalm 13) as you did, it is easy



to preach a Jewish sermon. Christ is not mentioned in the text, so when you “preach the text” you might be tempted to think you can get along without putting Christ into the center of your sermon. This was precisely one point of debate reflected in the Apology to the Augsburg Confession (Art IV). Because of the Christ-less sermons so common in the church of his day, Melanchthon says: When the Gospel promise is not present in a Biblical text [like Psalm 13]—and you intend to preach on that text—“the promise of Christ must be added” so that what gets preached is what Christ wants his people to hear.

Walt and Tim, all these paragraphs are not intended to say I’m right, and you’re wrong. They come from the same pastoral heart that doubtless beats within you two. My intention is surely your intention too: that those who gather at Community of Joy might indeed have Christ’s joy, and that their joy be “full.” [John 17:13] There is only “one way” for that to happen—that they be connected (and re-connected Sunday after Sunday after Sunday) to Christ who in John 17 “goes to the Father” and is “glorified” on Good Friday & Easter.

If you get to read this before next Sunday’s worship, check out what’s going to happen. The test is simple. For the sermon: Did Christ die in vain? For the Lord’s Supper: Is it “is,” or isn’t it? For a Community of [His] Joy the answers here make all the difference.

I commend that joy to you—and through your pastoral work to the folks Christ has entrusted to your care.

In His Peace & in His Joy!  
Ed Schroeder

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Tues. March 25, 2003



Dear Ed,

Your critique was interesting. I believe you missed out on the true meaning and message of the "good news" that was being communicated. I totally disagree with your judgemental evaluation. I am not convinced that is the reason we worship! All I know is that lives were transformed during the very moments you were judging. In 25 years at Joy there has never been one week go by where a life is not totally and radically transformed by the power of the gospel. Maybe Joy does not do it the way you would do it....however God gets the job done! Maybe it is a good thing that neither you nor I are God!

Dr. Walther P. Kallestad  
A Community of Joy

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March 27, 2003

Dear Walt,

Thanks for your response. It seems we're on two different wavelengths. Possibly tuned in to two different programs, both of which claim to be "Gospel." I think I understand yours. My hunch is that you don't understand mine. But I could be wrong—on both counts.

Even so, for the sake of that Gospel—one more time.

I reprint your text [with bracketed numerals inserted] and comment where the brackets are.

Your critique was interesting. I believe you missed out on the  
true meaning and message of the "good news" [1] that was  
being communicated.



I totally disagree with your judgemental [2] evaluation. I am not convinced that is the reason we worship! [3] All I know is that lives were transformed during the very moments you were judging. [4] In 25 years at Joy there has never been one week go by where a life is not totally and radically transformed by the power of the gospel.[5] Maybe Joy does not do it the way you would do it.[6]...however God gets the job done! [7] Maybe it is a good thing that neither you nor I are God! [8]

[1] "you missed out on the true meaning and message of the good news'"

That is exactly the point of debate between us: Just what is the "true meaning and message of the 'good news'"? What I heard you preach in that service was not "the true meaning and message of the 'good news.'" So my claim is that your sermon "missed out" on that Good News. This is not mud-slinging. It is a debate about substance. To wit: the N.T. "core" for THE Good News is "Christ crucified and risen," isn't it? These specs are the necessary content for bringing Christian faith, hope, love, joy to people. Your sermon never mentioned this crucified and risen Messiah. So by this definition—and my claim is that this is Christ's own definition—it was not HIS good news that got preached, but someone else's. We probably disagree on what the specs for THE gospel are. You know my thoughts. I'd like to hear what you think those specs are.

[2] "judgmental"

In my Webster this word is "harsh—and often baseless—criticism." Yes, I was critical (= making an evaluative judgment) and perhaps to you it was harsh, but it



was not baseless. Listen to the tape/video of your 9:35 a.m. sermon (March 16) and see if my ears heard correctly. I was not trying to “trap” you as I sat in the pew, but was listening for the Gospel that I live by, the only Gospel that Christ commands us pastors to preach, and urges us listeners to trust. I was wishing to be re-fueled for the coming week with that Good News. Nowhere did we hearers get THAT Gospel..

[3] “the reason we worship!”

I made no comments at all on “the reason we worship,” nor on the sort of worship at Community Church of Joy. My entire letter focused on the proclamation you offered, and also on the Zwinglian theology Tim proclaimed at the celebration of the Lord’s Supper.

[4] “lives were transformed”

Of course, lives can be transformed by your winsome preaching. My point is: what was this preacher’s message? And from that message what sort of transformation arises? Doesn’t the N.T. Scriptures claim that without a Crucified and Risen Christ being proclaimed, “lives” are not, nor can they be, transformed into what Christ wants them to become? They may be transformed into something else, but not into “conformity” to Christ. Once more, you may call that harsh. But the point of our debate is a matter of substance, not niceness or harshness. It may be a hard word, but it’s all over the NT. And it’s no harder than Paul’s own words about the other gospels he encountered in the very churches he founded, gospels that often bypassed the crucified/risen Christ and thus, so he claimed, rendered Christ’s death “in vain.”

[5] “totally and radically transformed by the power of the gospel”

Which gospel? That’s the issue here. I wish you would make the case—for what I sense you do believe—that a sermon without



Christ crucified/risen, can still be a "Gospel" sermon. But which Gospel is that? Muslim clerics and Jewish Rabbis proclaim their own sort of "gospel" to their hearers. Those sermons are full of God-talk, but Christ crucified/risen is NEVER mentioned—for obvious reasons. Our Christ is NEVER the power for transformation in those sermons. Yet from such sermons human lives get transformed. People also get joy. There is power in those "other" gospels to do that. But the end-product is not what the "true" Gospel of Christ produces. So I ask you: What's the difference? What makes your sermon "Christian" gospel and the other sermons Jewish or Muslim when none of them offers the Crucified/Risen Christ to the hearers for their transformation?

[6] "Maybe Joy does not do it the way you would do it."  
Sorry, I think you're side-stepping. Our debate is not about how "I" want it done vs. how "Joy" does it. Our debate is about "Christ's" mandate to all of us on "the way to do it," namely how to proclaim HIS gospel. And if "the way" that I'm proposing to you is not His way, then you need to instruct me, show me, from the Scriptures that what you preached is what Christ authorizes his disciples to proclaim as his Gospel.

[7] "however God gets the job done!"  
Your church's "Foundations of Faith" document says: "we affirm and identify with the Confessions of the Lutheran Church." So I'll ask a VERY Lutheran question: Which one of God's two "jobs" are you talking about? Those Lutheran Confessions—and I know that you know this—confess that God is constantly doing two "jobs" in the world—law and promise. And, of course, they got this from the Bible. In II Cor. 3, for example, Paul asserts that God does two "jobs" (Paul calls them "ministries") on sinners. One's a ministry that "kills," the other a ministry that "gives life." When the crucified/risen one is not preached, God's ministry that "gives life" does not happen.



Nevertheless God's "other job" gets "done," namely, the "ministry of condemnation—the ministry of death." The Lutheran Reformation, your tradition and mine, was all about this. Christless sermons do indeed "do" a job, but it's not good news for sinners.

[8]"Maybe it is a good thing that neither you nor I are God!" True enough. But irrelevant for our debate. Because there are objective criteria—call it the New Testament—for determining what is and what is not Gospel-preaching.

*Summa:*

Your words say it crisply. It's all about "the true meaning and message of the 'good news'." My contention is that what we heard that Sunday was not "good enough" to pass Christ's own test for Good News. If you think it was, then I need to be edified—by you.

You may find it difficult to believe, but I too have a care for the people in your Community Church of Joy. Why else would I expend so much effort in responding to you? Answer: Because there is an even "better" gospel in the N.T. and in our Lutheran confessional heritage. I want you and them to benefit from it.

Peace & Joy!  
Ed Schroeder

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As of April 30, 2003 there has been no further exchange.

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# The Eastering of Robert W. Bertram

Colleagues,

Bob Bertram was born on Easter Day in 1921. Easter was early that year, March 27. An Easter egg hatchling, right from scratch. He never got over it. Therefore it was no surprise that Easter was the cantus firmus of our liturgy in his memory on March 22. Yes, he'd given instructions. And in those instructions Easter was all hooked to Bob's baptism, the same way St. Paul does it in Romans 6. Bob died on March 13, two weeks short of his 82nd birthday, five weeks short of Easter this year. Some of us wondered in those final days—sotto voce, of course—whether he'd bring it full circle to this year's Easter on April 20. He was that kind of guy. He didn't stand on ceremony, but if ceremony was possible, he'd go for it. One of his favorite German proverbs was; "Wenn schon, denn schon." Colloquially translated: "If you can finesse it, do it!"

Bob "played" with Easter in his theologizing. Even made a verb out of the noun. God Eastered Christ after three days. Christ Easters us with his sweep swap. And then that verb in the form of participle and gerund [do kids even learn those terms anymore?] into "Eastering." So the full range of the Gospel is our Eastering—from cradle (a.k.a. baptism) to the grave—and then beyond. See how Bob talked "Eastering" in the item below about "death-period" and "death-comma."

Another prominent parallel in Bob's verb-crafting came from the word "holy," as in Holy Spirit. That Spirit is the HolyING Spirit. And in Bob's lexicon the Holying Spirit was the Healing Spirit.



Well, that memorial service here in St. Louis was high and holying hoopla from beginning to end. Eastering too. A week later at Valparaiso University in Indiana there was another one. What follows are two artifacts, one from each of the two liturgies. Shorter one is mine from the service here in town. Longer piece is Fred Niedner's sermon at the Valparaiso celebration. In between some cyber-info for seeing visuals of the St. Louis event.

Peace & Joy! Blessed Eastering!  
Ed Schroeder.

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### **RWB REQUIEM**

**(E.Schroeder's encomium at the Memorial Liturgy,  
March 22, 2003)**

*At Luther's funeral, Philip Melanchthon was the preacher. His most poignant words were: "Most of all I thank God for Martin Luther because he taught me the Gospel."*

*Bob Bertram taught me the Gospel. Many of you here are saying the same. For me it started 55 years ago—I was 18—when he was my teacher at Valparaiso University. Bob was in the philosophy department, but that's where theology was being done. Valpo's mad genius president O P Kretzmann had hired Bob—along with other young hotshots like Jaroslav Pelikan, Dick Luecke (also in the philosophy dept.)—to put meat on the bones of the University's vision: to join Athens and Jerusalem. "High academic scholarship and high religion," as OP liked to call it. But the blueprint was fuzzy. So the hotshots were called in to work it out.*



After Pelikan and Luecke moved to other callings, Bob stayed on (a total of 15 years) to work out the blueprint. He pulled it straight from the theology of the Lutheran Reformation, actually straight from the Lutheran Confessions, the focus of his doctoral work at the University of Chicago. The blueprint was actually simple. For reading the Bible it is the Law/Gospel lenses. For reading the world and for acting in the world it's the same lenses: God's Law at work to care for that world and critique it, and then God's Gospel promise to redeem it. For the last 30 years he called it Crossings.

After Bob was my college teacher in the 1940s, I later joined him as teaching colleague at Valpo. We worked on the blueprint together, and as he sometimes said, we've been "joined at the hip" ever since. At Concordia Seminary, at Seminex, and in the Crossings Community he founded.

Bob had thousands of students during his years of teaching. And surprising as it may sound, that number increases even though he has died. Bob's theological paradigm has a website. Law/promise theology as we learned it from Bob gets posted each week on the Crossings website. The response grows and grows. It's now 1200 "hits" each day. That's almost one per minute. Last year 59,000 different folks (from well over 100 diff. countries) visited the website to check out law/promise theology.

Bob and I were buddies. That's his word. Andy Weyermann said we were like the Lone Ranger and Tonto. [Later I learned what 'tonto' really meant, namely, simple-minded] Even so. Bob could talk the language of the Univ. of Chicago and do law/promise theology with the eggheads, and Farmboy Ed could do likewise with the students not quite so gifted. It was a strange and wonderful relationship. [You can guess which adjective applied to which one of us.]



The Lone Ranger image is a good one. For Bob was also a “masked man,” even to this buddy. There was more going on inside than he ever let me see. How many times did a conversation end with him saying: “I’ll have to tell you about that some time.” But such times never came—even as we spent lots of time together at his bedside. But one thing I did hear at his bedside that I’d never heard before was: “Eddy, the FUN we had—at Valpo, at Seminex, in Crossings. Count it all joy. Thank you Jesus.”

Like the Lone Ranger, Bob also used silver bullets, colloquial expressions for the specs of Law/Gospel (a.k.a. Law/Promise) theology. The besetting sin of us “good folks,” was the “Pharisee heresy.” Christ’s work on the cross, what Luther called the “froehlicher Wechsel” became God’s “sweet swap” with sinners. When Law and Gospel contended, the Gospel finally “trumped” the Law. [See the 8-foot banner over there carried in many a Seminex procession. It boldly proclaims: “We shall rise OUR LORD to meet, treading DEATH beneath our feet.” The word DEATH on the dragon underfoot of the three euphoric rejoicers (one of the three with black, one with red, and one with a white—well pink—face) is in silver—that’s powerful—but OUR LORD with hands widespread above these three is in gold. Gold trumps silver.]

One of the silver bullets was his “folksy” retelling of the Gospel for this past Sunday, Reminiscere. The Sunday in Lent to remember how God remembers us —“in gold.” That Gospel text speaks about trying to save your life and still losing it vs. losing your life for Christ’s sake, and then gaining it all back again. In the Bertram version, “Life is not win/lose. Nor is it win/win, says Jesus. It’s lose/lose. But there are two different ways to lose! One is hanging onto your life like this [arms clutched around self] and that is Lose-PERIOD! The other is giving your life away [hands extended palms open] connected to Christ. You still lose your life, but this losing is Lose-



COMMA. And there is another clause coming."

Today we mark God's COMMA to the life of blessed Bob. The rest of the sentence of Bob's life story is on the banner.

The Gospel is in that comma. Bob taught me the Gospel.

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One of Bob's Crossings' students, Sherman Lee, offers this:  
For photos from the RWB Memorial liturgy, please go to:

<http://homepage.mac.com/sherman42/Crossings/>

- The password is "peacejoy"
  - Please also note the other Crossings-related photo albums.
  - SEE ESP. two photos of The Banner (described in Ed's encomium above) in the photo collection "Richard Lyon Memorial" at the same website.
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## **Chapel of the Resurrection, Valparaiso, Indiana**

### **28 March 2003**

**"Wherever we went, he always got there first."**  
**in memoriam, Robert W. Bertram, 1921-2003**

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going." Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not



know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him." John 14:1-7

It was Bob Bertram's own idea that we should have this service. Through Michael Hoy, former colleague and now friend in St. Louis, the request came already last summer. Bob still felt connected enough to this place and this community that he wished to be remembered here in this way—as though we might forget! The service we're doing is modeled on the one conducted on Saturday in St. Louis. The cover of the service folder bore the title: "Thanks Eternally." (That was the closing to a note Bob wrote to his pastor concerning the shape of the memorial service and the homily to be preached as part of it.) Some of you were there, and you heard—even spoke—some of the words of thanks and commemoration offered there on Saturday. We've now woven some of our own stories into the mix of those we gather up as a way of giving thanks today for Bob's life and for what he gave to each of us, and to all of us together. With our hands upraised we join in thanks as we hand our brother Robert back to the one who gave him to us.

Plenty of stories got shared in that St. Louis service. Ed Schroeder, also a teacher and colleague to some of us here, remembered almost a lifetime of connections with Bob. As David Truemper said today about Melanchthon and Luther, and himself and Bob, so also did Ed describe Bob first of all as the person who taught him, Missouri biblicist that he was, the gospel. That was here, at Valpo, in the late 1940's. They went on to have a relationship something like that of the Lone Ranger and Tonto, Ed said.

John Tietjen, president of the St. Louis seminary and later of



*Seminex, remembered Bob as a poet of theology and a theologian of poetry, a man of words, imagination, and letters who did his writing on the canvass of our hearts—and always in the shape of the cross.*

*Bob's pastor and friend, Arden Mead, preached the sermon. He, too, told stories, including some from the difficult, tumultuous days of the great Missouri war of the 1970's. He began and ended, however, by saying that the most important thing he could think to say about Bob Bertram was that Jesus Christ loved Bob enough to give his life for him. And the second most important thing was that Bob never got over it. He closed by saying he guessed he never would. Get over it, that is.*

*And there were stories from Bob's children, all of them. Bob was a husband and dad, too, and a brother. That by itself was amazing to some of us. Given all he did that we knew about, how in the world did he also have time for a personal life?*

*I'm to preach, not tell stories, but I searched my synapses for a memory of Bob that would go with the gospel lesson he chose for his memorial service. I found one personal anecdote. At the beginning of my time as a student at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, Bob was filling in for a short-handed department of historical theology. Thus, my first experience of Bob as a teacher came in a second-year course in Reformation history. At his direction, we conducted medieval-style disputations on historical and theological questions. We marveled at this teacher who spoke so easily and eloquently and in such detail, without reading from notes, and constructed long, complex sentences that strung together all manner of dependent clauses without ever getting lost in them, nor did he ever say, "uh. . ."*



*But something from the first day of that long-ago term remains the vivid memory that links with these lessons. When giving us the usual course details, assignments, syllabus, and book list, Bob told us, almost in passing it seemed at first, "My attendance policy is simple. If you are prepared, you may come." We thought this unusual, even a bit curious, but didn't give it a lot of thought until some weeks later on a day when class discussion lagged, and Bob called on a few students by name. "Mr. Tetlinger, what does Luther say about this?" There was no response. Bob asked, "Are you prepared?" When the answer was negative, Bob gestured toward the door, and with a sweep of his other hand invited all other malefactors present to find their way to the same exit. A silent, embarrassed recessional ensued. And in the next class period we had very lively discussion.*

*If you are prepared, you may come. When I came to Valpo to teach, thanks to Bob, by the way, at least in part, I imitated not only his sentence structures as best I could, and the practice of medieval disputations in a Lutheran Confessions class, but I bravely used his attendance policy. "If you are prepared, you may come." I quickly learned that college students in the '70's were different from seminarians. They thought this was great, and loved to be dismissed.*

*"If you are prepared, you may come." I almost chose that as my title today. The policy still sticks with me, because among other things, it strikes me as an entrée to the gospel lesson, those words from Jesus' farewell discourses with the disciples. "I go to prepare a place for you," Jesus said.*

*But I couldn't use that line all by itself, if nothing else because I had the strong sense that Bob was looking over my shoulder as I prepared, and that attendance policy is law. It does not by itself hold a sermon. It is conditional. So we must*



add another line, another story. It seems to me just the right one came from Bob and Thelda's son John Bertram at the memorial service last Saturday. He's here today, by the way, and could, if necessary, correct my memory of his words. John told us all the story of his family's relationship with Aloisius, a character in a famous, old German story, "Ein Münchener im Himmel." In that story, Aloisius, ein Münchener, caused much disruption when he arrived in heaven. He wanted things the way he wanted them, and one thing he wanted was to drink beer at the times he was accustomed.

It seems that the Bertram family gave the name Aloisius to the new Volkswagen bus they purchased for transportation during a sojourn in Germany. John told about travels and adventures of the Bertram family and Aloisius, and one image from his tribute stuck with me. He recalled that his dad always drove the Volkswagen bus, which meant Bob was seated up against the glass up at the flat front of that vehicle that seemed so long and so large to the children. "This meant," John noted, "that wherever we went, he always got there first."

And I thought, "Yes. That's my picture of Bob, too." Wherever we went, he always got there first. As my teacher, later as a colleague at Seminex, and throughout my adult life as a friend, yet always, still, his student—wherever we went, he always got there first.

Those of us who studied with Bob all learned some phrases, some habits of language, and certain theological methods that go with them. Ed Schroeder, Tonto, calls them "silver bullets," like the "Pharisee heresy," or the "sweet swap" that God in Christ makes with sinners. Bob's students, myself included, also inherited the language of diagnosis and prognosis. We learned to peel back the layers of our diseases, probing the depths of the damage apparent in our human condition, until we



came at last face to face not only with symptoms, but with our idolatries, vanity, and our utter hopelessness. And never, as we learned these things, did it ever seem that Bob the teacher merely said, "You must go there, to those depths of diagnosis and confession, if you would be a theologian, or even a Christian." No, we knew that wherever we went, he'd been there first.

And it became apparent to us, too, that we could dig down like that, deep into the muck of diagnosis, almost fearlessly, because we knew that beyond diagnosis lay prognosis. Promise. Bad as the diagnosis was, we would always find Jesus Christ, surprisingly enough, right there with us, pinned with the same diagnosis, "made to be sin who knew no sin." But that amazing discovery meant that we got to share his prognosis, too, which always proved hopeful—indeed, glorious! The gospel's prognosis made us free. Free enough, among other things, to persist in the fearless and radical discipline of diagnosing the layers of illness in ourselves and in our world. In the joy of that freedom, rejoicing with this prognosis in hand, we also could see that these weren't merely words and method, but that Bob lived this prognosis. Indeed, it was his life. Wherever we went, he always got there first.

"I go to prepare a place for you," Jesus told the disciples. In this scene of John's gospel, that statement confused the disciples somewhat. They didn't know what place Jesus meant, or where he was going.

We think we know—he's going to his Father's house, to the heavenly mansions, to get our "rooms" ready. But that's not quite what John's gospel proclaims, for such a theology would skip the cross and go straight to glory. It would offer prognosis without diagnosis. No, after this promise that Jesus will prepare a place for us, John's gospel takes pains to tell



*of several places Jesus would go quite deliberately before he ever took leave for the heavenly mansions. First, after supper, there would be the place that Judas knew, the place where Jesus would find himself betrayed and arrested. Jesus would go there because that place would require some preparation, for disciples, ancient and modern, always end up there, too. He must ready it for us.*

*Next came the place called Golgatha, and finally the place where they laid his body, in a new tomb where no one else had lain. Jesus went there. We will end up there also, as Bob now has, thanks to the cancer that betrayed his body, assaulted his brain, and nailed him to a hospice bed. Those same places await us. But they are ready for us now, prepared for all of us, and Christ awaits us there. There is no place any one of us can go but that even there Jesus Christ is Lord for us, and we land even there in his company.*

*Wherever we travel, he's always got there first. And in his embrace, we experience the sweet swap, we share his prognosis. A place is prepared for us. This message with all its layers and depth and riches we learn from our teachers, our parents, the ones like Bob who go before us. The gift itself comes from The Teacher, the crucified and risen one.*

*If you are prepared, you may come. Thankfully, the preparation has been done already in our baptism. And the Teacher himself completes and perfects the preparation. We live, therefore, with this promise: All is prepared. You will come. For wherever we go, he always got there first.*

*Thanks, eternally.*

*Frederick A. Niedner*

*Chapel of the Resurrection, Valparaiso, Indiana*

*28 March 2003*



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# Voices from Australia: One on Armageddon, one on the Holy Spirit

Colleagues,

This week's ThTh passes on to you two items I received in recent days from fellow Lutherans in Australia. The two are not obviously on the same topic—one on Armageddon, one on the Holy Spirit. But cognoscenti among you will doubtless make connections. The FIRST is a single paragraph from Dr. John ("Joe") Strelan, retired prof (New Testament and Systematics), the dear guy who "recruited" us to teach alongside him at Luther Seminary in "Oz" (as we learned to call it) for my first post-retirement year of "not working anymore" in 1994. Joe's doctoral dissertation on Melanesian "Cargo Cults" in Papua New Guinea, drawing on his years of missionary service there, is still the classic theological analysis of the phenomenon.

In the paragraph below, Joe gently corrects me in a recent posting where I portrayed Biblical Armageddon as an apocalyptic "last battle." Not so, says Joe. Read what he says.

The SECOND segment of today's posting is a reprint (with permission) of an article in the March issue of THE LUTHERAN, the magazine of the Lutheran Church of Australia. The LCA was our most gracious host during that 1994 year downunder. Another ELCA pastor joined us during our time there, Dr Mark Worthing. At their home that year, so I remember, we gathered for a "typical" American Thanksgiving dinner on the right day in



November. Which was hard to confect since Aussies don't have our kind of pumpkins!

Mark Worthing's article is about another dear colleague, Ethiopian-born Pastor Gemechis Desta Buba. Gemechis was a creme-de-la-creme student in my systematic theology classes the year after Oz (1995) when we moved from Adelaide to the Mekane Yesus Seminary in Addis Ababa. Gemechis, now completing a Ph.D. in the USA, has made a big splash—of all places—in Australia. Read it and Rejoice.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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## **JOE STRELAN ON ARMAGEDDON**

### ***Ed: Further to your remarks on Armageddon:***

*Rev 16:14,16 has the demonic forces gathering the kings of the earth for battle 'on the great day of God almighty'. But there is no battle reported. This is often overlooked by Christians of all stripes. There is no battle because the battle has already been fought and won – as Easter testifies. The verb 'gather' is used in Scripture (especially in Matthew) for 'gathering for judgment by God'. The irony here is that the demon enemies of God gather their forces together – not, however (as they think) for battle, but for judgment...on a day of God's choosing, since it is, after all, GOD'S great day. Because of the judgment motif in connection with Armageddon, John's hearers are warned not to be caught naked and ashamed, that is, asleep and unprepared. How do we prepare? Luther said: thru daily repentance, running back to our baptism, etc as you*



have written more eloquently on numerous occasions in recent months.

Summa: Armageddon means judgment, not battle.

Thanks for the easterings in recent ThThs.

Joe

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Reprint from THE LUTHERAN, March 2003

## ***“An Ethiopian pastor gets us talking about the third person of the Trinity”***

### **SPIRITED DEBATE**

***by Mark Worthing***

*It was nine o'clock in the morning when Pastor Wayne Zweck and I arrived at the Qantas lounge of the domestic terminal of Sydney airport. We had been asked by the College of [LCA District] Presidents to meet and brief Gemechis Desta Buba, a twenty-seven-year-old Ethiopian pastor and seminary lecturer from the Mekane Yesus (Lutheran) church, currently undertaking doctoral studies in the US.*

*His visit to Australia last year had caused a great deal of interest (and concern) among LCA members, after a number of people either passed out or fell over while being prayed for by Pastor Gemechis during services at two Lutheran churches in Adelaide. This phenomenon is often called 'being overcome in the Spirit' or 'slain in the Spirit' (although Pastor Gemechis prefers the term 'resting in Jesus').*

*On this return visit, Pastor Gemechis's itinerary would take him to congregations in New Zealand and to every state and territory of Australia except Tasmania and the Northern Territory. Our task was not to tell him what the Spirit may or*



may not do within his ministry, but rather to find out more about him and to share with him something of the history and complexities of the LCA.

Pastor Gemechis finds it somewhat ironical that he has become known in Australia for his connection to people being 'overcome in the Spirit'. He is chiefly an academic. As a seminary lecturer in Ethiopia he went to the US to complete a second master's degree and is now working on a PhD in the sociology of religion at Emory University. He was much more interested in talking with us about Lutheran theology than 'slayings in the Spirit', and he admitted that this sort of thing had not happened in connection with his ministry—though it is common in his church—until his last visit to Australia. He was genuinely concerned that the content of his message in his sermons and lectures might be lost in all the fascination with what was happening when he prayed for people. Even before our conversation with Pastor Gemechis, he was aware that this was a very foreign experience for Australian Lutherans and he was concerned that the nature of his program of flying visits meant that he would have little opportunity to work through with pastors and people the implications of such experiences.

After four hours of conversation and a light lunch together, it was time for Pastor Gemechis to continue on to Brisbane. He thanked us profusely for the courtesy and thoughtfulness of meeting him at the airport and telling him more about the history and theology of the LCA. To be honest, Pastor Zweck and I had feared he would see us as a 'God squad' sent from officialdom—an inconvenience to be patiently endured. We had not expected to be enthusiastically and genuinely thanked for our hospitality. But such is the character and spirit of the man.

During the next week I heard reports from Queensland—ranging



from joy to shock—of Lutheran people and pastors being ‘overcome in the Spirit’, as well as one account of how very Lutheran the content of Pastor Gemechis’s preaching was. He would be coming to Adelaide soon, and, among other engagements, would spend an evening at Our Saviour Lutheran Church, Aberfoyle Park, where I am an associate pastor.

I have seldom been so nervous about a worship service. Should I go up for prayer? Would I seem unspiritual if I didn’t? What if I went forward and fell over? What would people think? What if I didn’t fall over? This whole thing wasn’t really my cup of tea. But others I knew had said similar things and had a very different perspective afterwards. I decided to decide at the time.

The evening itself began with about twenty minutes of well-presented contemporary Christian music. Then Pastor Gemechis was introduced. He preached on prayer (no mention of tongues or ‘slayings in the Spirit’) from a text in the Psalms. The sermon went for just over an hour.

I had never seen anything like it in a Lutheran service before. About three hundred people, including at least nine Lutheran pastors, sat mesmerised for an hour, listening to a theology of prayer being developed from the Psalms. Several took notes. This was all very un-Lutheran indeed!

After the sermon the band was invited back up and began to play, as Pastor Gemechis invited anyone desiring prayer to come forward. A few tentative souls came forward, then a few more, followed by dozens. Lay leaders from the congregation stood behind people as they were prayed for in case anyone fell backwards. Pastor Gemechis put one and often both hands on the side of the head of those for whom he prayed. Sometimes he took hold of their hands and raised them into the air above their



heads. A short prayer was usually concluded with the words: 'Receive fresh anointing of the Spirit', with the word 'fresh' particularly emphasised.

At first no-one fell over, though a couple stepped back to keep from losing their balance. From where I stood, along the side at the front of the church, I could look straight down the line. Pastor Gemechis stood very close to those for whom he prayed and seemed to move them back off their centre of gravity before letting go of them. Soon a couple of people went down. And then more. It looked a bit like those trust exercises where you let yourself fall backwards, knowing someone is there to catch you. That people fell backwards during prayer seemed all very explicable because of a combination of factors: the way hands were laid on heads, the music, the desire to experience something, and the almost hypnotic sound of Pastor Gemechis's voice, particularly as he spoke the word 'freeesh!' But then a few people simply crumpled before me.

To add to the mix, Pastor Gemechis paused on four or five occasions to say a prophetic word over someone. These were essentially words of encouragement that God was going to use them to spread the gospel or to help people going through difficult times. While the comments were fairly general, those who knew the people he spoke these words over generally agreed that they fit. This time of prayer lasted about forty-five minutes. No ecstatic utterances. No speaking in tongues. It was all very orderly. People lined up along the front, much as they would for communion. Many fainted or fell backwards. A number had tears in their eyes. When they got up again they went back to their seats to make room for others.

After the service, while Pastor Gemechis was praying individually with those still wanting prayer, a small group of us from the sceptics' corner were debriefing about what had



happened. One man had commented that he had some serious concerns about the whole thing. Then someone brought Pastor Gemechis over to him. 'This fellow is facing some difficult decisions', they said. 'He needs prayer.' Pastor Gemechis asked us all to place our hands on the man as he prayed for him. I put my hand on his shoulder to make sure he wasn't put off balance! Part way through the prayer, he simply crumpled. A few minutes later he arose in tears and rejoined our sceptics' corner. 'I have no idea what just happened', he said. 'But, praise God! I feel such a sense of peace.'

I came to the meeting hoping either to see enough to completely debunk the whole experience, or to be convinced that the Spirit was moving here in some special way. I left the meeting in two minds. On the one hand, the mood of the meeting, the expectations of those who went forward, perhaps a slight hypnotic effect, and simple physics were more than enough to account for much of what I saw. On the other hand, there were things that occurred that did not fit easily into any of my explanatory categories. I was also mindful of the fact that, just because something has a partial or even complete physical and logical explanation, it does not mean that God is not at work in what happened. I decided that I needed to wait and see what impact this had on those who experienced these things. So far, reports from congregations that Pastor Gemechis visited last year and from congregations at which he preached during his most recent visit have been mostly positive—even from those pastors who remain sceptical about some things that occurred.

For the LCA as a whole it has been a significant experience of a Lutheran tradition and style of ministry very different to our own. We experienced a dynamic preacher and teacher from a church that has known recent persecution and for which healings, prophecies and being 'overcome in the Spirit' are not unusual worship experiences. The biggest test for us as a



church is how we respond to these things, to the people who have experienced them, and to those who are worried that these things have occurred in many of our congregations.

I personally believe God's Spirit is at work in the LCA, whether we have experienced such phenomena or not. How could the Spirit not be at work among his baptised people?

I am also thankful for the opportunity to have met Pastor Gemechis and to have experienced his passion for evangelism, Lutheran theology and the power of prayer. Like many, I am not certain what exactly did or did not happen during his times of prayer ministry. One thing, however, is clear. Whatever we feel about what occurred at many of these services, there is no denying that the visit of this remarkable Ethiopian Lutheran pastor to so many of our congregations has changed us.

[Dr Mark Worthing is an associate pastor of Our Saviour Lutheran Church, Aberfoyle Park, South Australia, and is currently dean of theology at Tabor College, Adelaide.]

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[Sidebar Article]

## **"THE GOING DOWN WAS IRRELEVANT"**

Many people in our congregation felt blessed over the weekend. Many experienced the personal prayer and blessing delivered through Pastor Gemechis. Many did 'fall down', touched by the Spirit. This happened to me; I have never before sought or experienced this. The atmosphere was neither hysterical nor exaggerated. We simply, quite unexpectedly, found ourselves caught up in something astonishing, affirming and, for a conservative Lutheran like myself, remarkable. I received no great revelation, no vision, no trance. I did feel a little warmth and a pronounced sense of peace and wellbeing. Analysing



*it later that evening, I was aware that I had not willed myself to slide down; it was not part of a choice by me. Instead, I felt enfolded in peace, a sense of being 'home'. The going down was irrelevant.*

*In one of the talks given by Gemechis, he spoke of the Spirit not 'infilling' but 'enfolding' the individual. I have meditated on this. I know my Lord walks both within and beside me as I go about each day. It has become an empowering concept for me. I am confident of much blessing yet to come for myself and our congregation. I give glory not to our brother Gemechis, but to our loving Lord, who chose to work through him to bless us. I know Gemechis would agree.*

*Darryl Glover, deacon, Our Saviour Lutheran congregation, Rochedale, Queensland*

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# **The Day of Jesus Embedded in the Tomb**

Colleagues,

Introduction: Herewith a Saturday Soliloquy (in-between ThTh postings), a somber soliloquy – but not without hope. Some ruminations stemming from yesterday's 2 Good Friday liturgies. [I checked "soliloquy" in my Webster. First definition: The act of talking to oneself. Yes, sometimes I wonder—especially on this topic. Some of you tell me that you wonder too. Not till the second definition do we get monologue, which this Holy Saturday posting surely is.]



1. In both of the liturgies yesterday we heard the entire Passion Story according to St. John. Though neither of the two drew any connection to the headlines on the day's newspapers, you'll not be surprised that I couldn't help doing that.
2. At two places St. John's narrative jumped across to the newspaper in my head. "Jesus said to Peter, "Put your sword into its sheath; shall I not drink the cup which the Father has given me?" Crossing to today's headlines: God does not, before Armageddon, carry out God's war of good vs. evil with hammered steel. Evil is in human hearts, which swords can readily reach, but they never kill the evil. Evil and its energies always escape from pierced hearts to take up residence elsewhere. Taking a tip from my mentor of half a century ago, Werner Elert—and making it contextual—The Evil One has equally easy access to Iraq's presidential palaces as he does to the American White House.
3. The second Johannine text came in the long dialogue between Jesus and Pilate. Pilate reminds Jesus that he has the "exousia" to kill Jesus. [ Exousia is the Greek term for "authority," the "right" to do something. Not "power," as so often translated.] Whereupon Jesus reminds him "You would have no exousia over me unless it had been given you from above." To today's headlines: The "right" of those in power—the authorities, as we call them—to kill is a delegated right. It requires God's authorization. Jesus acknowledged Pilate's right to kill him as his God-delegated exousia—although Pilate doubtless didn't have a clue about that. The God-authorization for the exousia to kill is fundamental in John's theology—also in the subsequent political theology of the Reformation.
4. So we Americans MUST ask (so Jesus ala John) where is the God-authorization for us to kill Iraqis—even one of



them—let alone the thousands of corpses we’ve given them as we liberated the Iraqis? It is NOT a trivial question, though some of you have chided me as an old grump in that I, most likely, take no joy when thousands dance in the streets of Baghdad. They are not dancing on this Holy Saturday, according to the headline in our morning paper today: The Voice of Baghdad: –Yankee, Go Home! So much for “vox populi = vox dei.”

5. Ruminating (as farmboys—once cow-milkers—are likely to do) during those 2 Good Friday liturgies, I connected this Exousia conversation with another Jesus-word in Luke 12:14. When asked to adjudicate a legal case between two squabbling brothers, Jesus responded: “Man, who made me judge over you?” God-authorization for carrying out God’s left-hand work in politics and secular society is not a trivial question. Luke’s Jesus says so. Of course, you can thumb your nose at the requirement, or like Pilate be clueless about it. But if you don’t have divine authorization, then according to the divine jurisprudence you are committing murder. Murder is killing humans with no authorization from God. Even more, it’s killing with God’s flat-out forbid commandment against you.
6. Crossing now to the last month of our life in America and our war in Iraq. Pre-emptive strike [PS] is the root meaning of the Biblical word for murder [M].
7. The first recorded M in the Bible was Cain’s PS against Abel.
8. PS means killing someone before (as you fear) they may kill you—or if not actually kill you, be the “death” of you in some fashion in the future.
9. The “fear” factor is the sin-root of M. The actual killing in a PS is already a consequence, a fruit, of the sin-root.
10. The NRSV translation of the “don’t kill” commandment uses



the M word: "You shall not murder."

11. PS is now national policy in the USA. It happened without a debate, neither in the US Congress, nor in the public square. By the time Bush proclaimed it as our nation's policy, it was already public consensus. No wonder that we consented to the policy.
12. Fear is fundamental to this policy, to this national consensus. Our new "label-without-limits" for our most dangerous enemies is "terrorists." But note, the terror is not in them. It is in us. They goad us by seeming so fearless!
13. Terror is mega-fear. [Biblical sample: Luke 2:9 (in the Greek) says: "They feared a mega-fear." In English "terror-stricken."] Merely admitting our mega-fear shows that the terrorists have already won.
14. And we "have to" become counter-terrorists. "They" leave us no other option. There is only one way to counter terrorism, we reason: Do unto these enemy-others as they are doing to us. But of course, we cannot predicate the T-word to ourselves. Our euphemism for our counter-terrorist terrorism (killing them before they kill us) is "shock and awe." It sounds so non-lethal. It is still murder.
15. Murder as national policy, we once claimed (60 yrs ago), was the national policy of Hitler and Hirohito. Japan's PS on Dec. 7, 1941 was a "day of infamy," our then president said. Our PS on Iraq is a war for "their liberty," our president now claims. And most of us agree that he's speaking for us.
16. Hitler did a PS on Poland September 1, 1939. We still say it was murder. Even though it was perfectly clear to German people that this PS was "just" bringing back "home into the Reich" the German lands given to Poland at Versailles a mere 20 years before. One of those places was Parlin bei Bromberg, my (German, of course) grandmother's



home town. Even so we still see it as murder. Hitler's Polish Blitzkrieg took a mere 26 days. Did ours in Iraq even take that long? We are a more developed country than Germany was.

17. Thus besides the fear-factor, there is the truth-factor. We are liars—especially about murder. Pre-emptive strike is our euphemism to make murder sound kosher. Just as “taking out” two to three thousand Iraqi defenders—that was one of our soldiers' count—in our first “in and out” thrust into Baghdad doesn't quite sound like bloodshed. It is not just in our propaganda to others, but to ourselves. The most deadly deception is self-deception. Even apart from the Bible, secular folks know that “the first casualty of war is truth.” Also in our American war on terrorism.
18. Truth, like fear, is the vocabulary of theology—not just psychology or morality.
19. Fear is now inescapably woven into the turf of the fallen world, populated throughout with sinners, fractured images of God. There was a time when fear was not. In the primal Biblical narrative it came into the world with Adam and Eve's unfaith. In fact three “new” things entered human history with that act of unfaith, three realities that had never been there before: Conscience, fear, and the law of retribution. [I'm taking this from Elert's *The Christian Ethos*.]
20. Conscience. Prior to the act of unfaith, the primal parents did not evaluate their own behavior. Seems that they simply took their behavioral signals from God, letting him decide what was good or evil. And they never gave it a second thought. Especially not to evaluate ex post facto “was that right or wrong?” The question never surfaced. Couldn't surface. There was no mechanism for it. But now with un-faith functioning, they “have to” be self-



evaluators. That was fundamental to the pitch of that “other voice” in the Garden, “you will be like God.” And one of God’s jobs is determining what’s good and what’s evil. But they moved into God’s preserve, ate from the good-and-evil-knowledge tree. So they are now stuck—and all their offspring thereafter—yes, now condemned, to use the fruit they ate, evaluate issues of good and evil. Yes, they do start to evaluate the good/evil of others, including God himself and verdict the behavior of others as evil. “The woman thou gavest me...” “The serpent beguiled me . . . [and you know who made all the animals!]” But that first recorded evaluation of others is already passing-the-buck to get the “evil” evaluation off their backs. It arises from their self-evaluating conscience working within. That is the primal phenomenon of “conscience,” internal self-evaluation. Conscience is a performance-checker now working inside everybody after the fall, “conflicting thoughts [that] will accuse or perhaps excuse them.” [Rom.2:15]

21. Fear. “I was afraid,” Adam tells God, “when I heard the sound of you in the garden.” Fear is un-faith now focused on the future, my personal future. An anticipation that some “ouch,” possibly even a lethal one, is coming toward me in the future.
22. Law of retribution. That is the third “new” reality in creation after the fall. It is the connector between conscience and fear. The awareness that what I have done in the past will indeed result in debit-credit consequences in the future. Conscience operates on the law of retribution. Good behavior will bring good in the future. Bad will bring bad. So behavioral evaluation is a necessity for survival.
23. America’s current mania for security (and, of course, the rest of the fallen world is just as manic) is founded on



these three “new” realities in the “old” fallen world. That mania now mobilizes our entire national enterprise. [An eerie parallel: the Nazi “SS” was the “Schutzstaffel,” the “security battallion—in charge of intelligence, central security, policing action, and eventually the extermination of those considered a threat to the nation.” N.B., John Ashcroft!]

24. CONSCIENCE: We are never-ending in measuring our national behavior, and telling ourselves and the world how good we are. Very little “accusing” of self; lots of “excusing.”
25. FEAR: What need have we of further witnesses in USA today? Terrorism is on every tongue. Worse yet, in (most) every heart.
26. LAW OF RETRIBUTION: We fudge on this one when it comes to seeing our own “ouches” as something deserved, rightful come-uppance for our own past behavior. Even less do we have any national antennae (any longer) for acknowledging these blows (e.g., 9.11.01) as GOD’s own exercise of HIS law of retribution. (Past ThTh postings noted that past US presidents Adams and Lincoln did have such antennae) We protest our innocence—land of the free, home of the brave with liberty and justice for all. The Pharisee heresy reigns.
27. BUT we are firmly committed to exercise that retributive law on others. The thousands of corpses we’ve left on Iraqi soil are powerful testimony to our commitment to “retributive justice” for others. Of course, there is no retributive connector to show that they “deserved” to die because we “feared” our security threatened. It is deception. The four-letter word is liar. And to claim, as President Bush has done, that we Americans are acting in God’s name—in the fight of good against evil (SIC!)—is what the Bible calls “blasphemy.” Born-again Christian that he is, he patently does not see that adjudicating



good and evil is at the core of human rebellion against God. And to claim that America now has that role—as he articulates it and we believe it—for the entire planet, is *lèse majesté* never before usurped in human history. The Tower of Babel attempt to take over God's turf ("the heavens") was kindergarten stuff. But Babel does sketch the Anti-god template that fractured humans regularly replicate, and that America will now bring to perfection.

28. What else is our self-assumed position as Judge of good-and-evil for the whole world but grabbing from God ALL the fruit of the "good-and-evil-knowledge-tree," with nary an apple left for God himself. Talk about chutzpah! Talk about hybris! And that now implemented by PS (a.k.a. murder—of 1000s) with no divine authorization! Talk about incurring God's wrath and judgment! Yes, God can delay (according to our time clocks)—and often has—even through a thousand years of our "glorious victories." He took a 100 yrs to give the Roman empire its come-uppance for its usurpation of his prerogatives. Hitler's lasted, however, for only 12 years. Might ours go even faster? Jesus said: The last estate of that [nation] is worse than the first. But then, to signal that there was a possible escape, he called to repentance and thereafter trusting his Good News.
29. Summa: If our terror-fixation were "rightly" focused, as Adam's was, on God our critic, that would be a great leap forward. Though not yet our healing. But it could lead to that. And the key, you've read it here in ThTh postings a zillion times since 9.11, is repentance. That's the exact word used by those two US presidents cited above—in time of war! Adams in the War of Independence, and Lincoln in the Civil War. That continues to be God's own prescription for us in the "War on T."
30. It's a repentance unto life! But as a nation, from our



leaders on down, we haven't a clue. And America's alleged religious leaders don't either. So we are going to lose this war—even if it takes 1000 yrs. Regardless of our presence in Baghdad. If you can't, don't, won't talk about God in the mix of our "national security threat," you've got your head in the sand. Talking "about" God, however, isn't yet salutary. Talking "to" God is. That's the only God-talk that can save. And in America, we probably are incapable of doing that. We are in prison. WE, who claim to be liberating others, we are the ones needing liberation. Big time. Physician, heal thyself.

31. This week, even though it was Holy Week and we were "churchy" for two of the evenings, we did catch most of the four-in-a-row two-hour PBS programs "Avoiding Armageddon" [AA]. Grand old media man Walter Cronkite was the host. [Was that name once Krankheit? Hmmm.] It was terrifying. It IS terrifying. What's all out there, and what one single match could unleash—or perhaps is already unleashed. There were dozens of themes, theological themes, to reflect on and respond to in the litany of impending doom and the counsel given by many. And it was all focused on AVOIDING Armageddon. But God never got mentioned—neither in the analysis nor in the avoidance counsel. Talk about straining at gnats and swallowing camels!. With one exception. See below.
32. Neither Cronkite, nor any of his dozens of super-experts from all sides all over the world, ever mentioned the word. Significant for his absence in AA was God. Can you imagine that? For 8 hours focused on the Biblical term Armageddon, the site of "the battle on the great day of God the Almighty" [Rev. 16:16], they forgot to mention God! Only in America.
33. There was, however, one constant exception: Whenever Muslims were interviewed—and there were lots of them, some



calmer than others—they were unable NOT to mention God. Armageddon talk for them meant God-talk. Had extra-terrestrial beings caught the program, the conclusion would be perfectly clear: “Muslim analysis is correct: the West is indeed godless. Muslims were talking about God all the time. The Western folks never. Not even in response to the Muslim God-talk.” They would have concluded: “If there is a deity operative on that strange blue planet, we’re sure whose side he’ll be on.”

34. This is patently not a plug for Islam. Examined through the lenses of the Reformation, Muslim theology hypes “deus absconditus,” God hidden. That needs radical help from God-in-Christ. Its way of salvation is performance and reward. That formula needs the same radical transformation. But at least they talk about, and to, God. Not to talk about God at all is cream-puffing the Muslims’ God-talk. Worse still, it is cream-puffing God himself. For which it is known that there are lethal consequences. Call it the law of retribution, operative since day one of fractured Eden. That retributive axiom now in operation throughout God’s world was not Adam’s invention. It has God’s signature in the corner. It hovers over our nation as never before.
35. Listening to God’s critique by itself will save no one. Remember Judas. But without listening to God’s critical call to repentance, you can’t even HEAR the Good News word called Easter. When repentance happens, good things can follow. Remember Peter. He got Eastered. Jesus gave the formulas—both for the bad news, and for the good. The former, “Except you repent, you will all likewise perish.” The latter, “Repent and believe the Good News.”
36. Maybe nations, as such, can’t “believe” the Good News—it’s hard to imagine—but they can repent. Besides John Adams and Abraham Lincoln, all the Hebrew prophets said so.



Jesus agreed. Repentance is the day(s) before Eastering. To get to that Sunday the road leads through a mortifying Friday and a grave-embedded Saturday. Even if “nations” can’t believe, thier security

Yours in THAT Easter Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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## Shock and Awe in Time of War, Part II

Colleagues,

Yesterday was Bonhoeffer Commemoration Day on the church calendar, the anniversary of his death in 1945. His name still signals “shock and awe” from the days of World War II. In last week’s Thursday Theology Amy Thoren took the Shock and Awe of current American rhetoric and ran it through the sieve of law and gospel. The “shock and awe” of the US war in Iraq does not come out godly. It isn’t even “good” law. With victory just around the corner, it’s still bad law. Theologically bad—very bad. For us Americans. Why? Simple. A pre-emptive strike is murder. Forget the deceptive euphemism. That was Luther’s response 5 centuries ago when the Pope urged a pre-emptive strike against Suleiman, the Saddam Hussein of his day. And, Luther noted, God does not bless murderers. So forget God Bless America. God avenges, not blesses, murder. God’s axiom: “vengeance is mine; I will repay.” Even in America’s fort hcoming “glorious victory,” our future is not promising. “Visiting the iniquities to the third and fourth generation of those who hate keeping the do-not-murder commandment,” God once said. So no matter how long



and loud we intone "God bless America," we're self-deceivers. There is no record of God ever blessing murderers. Au contraire. If there ever was a time for repentance, this is it.

Speaking of which, one of you, a recent victim of murderous trauma yourself, sent me this quote from David McCullough's book "John Adams" [Simon and Schuster, 2001. Page 160]. "One day as he [Adams] and Benjamin Rush sat together in Congress, Rush asked Adams in a whisper if he thought America would succeed in the struggle. 'Yes,' Adams replied, 'if we fear God and repent our sins.'" To which you, dear colleague, said: "What a contrast between the attitude of one who would become our second president and our present president!"

Enough from EHS. The substantive essay this week—still on this subject—comes from Maurice Schild, an Aussie. Maurice and I were colleagues in 1994 at Luther Seminary in Adelaide, Australia. More than colleagues, really, since we were co-conspirators in teaching Reformation History and Lutheran Confessional Theology at the seminary that whole year. Maurice recently retired, but he keeps on "doing Luther." And in what follows he "does" Bonhoeffer too.

In the 31 March 2003 issue of the magazine of the Lutheran Church of Australia, THE LUTHERAN, Maurice examines pre-emptive strikes and Luther's theology. The title tells it all. But don't just stop there. Read through to the end.

Even in these days—especially in these days—Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder



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## **NOT IN LUTHER'S NAME**

**By Maurice Schild**

*Though not on our soil, it seems that war is to be our destiny again. America holds out the bait just for a moment, and we-or our leaders-rise to it, we eager little Aussie battlers! As though we can swallow so much death.*

*The threat of a pre-emptive strike on Iraq is a radical new twist on the traditional idea of self-defence. The 'doctrine of pre-emption' was summed up by Robert Bird last month in a speech on the American senate floor. He called it 'the idea that the United States or any other nation can legitimately attack a nation that is not imminently threatening, but may be threatening in the future ...' It is the view that good Western nations like ours, far from turning the other cheek, should get in first, strike first! And, if there is any response, then also strike last, of course.*

*A pre-emptive strike appears to be in contravention of international law and the UN Charter. And it is being tested at a time of worldwide terrorism, making many countries around the globe wonder if they will be on our-or some other nation's-hit list.*

*What is going on here? Since the end of the Second World War, we have relied on deterrence and containment. Now, having pointed fingers at an 'axis of evil' and so-called 'rogue states' (none anywhere near the size of the former Russian empire or China, surely), we think that deterrence is too weak, and 'pre-emption' has to be rolled in! With no other legal qualification or restraint than that we are assured that 'pre-emption' will be 'in the national interest' of powerful*



*nations-our interest. But we live in a fragile and overcrowded global village, with chronically deprived and starving inhabitants. If 'pre-emption' is not good for them, it's not good.*

*Eisenhower insisted that 'the people of the world genuinely want peace. Some day the leaders of the world are going to have to give it to them.' The warning of Margot Kaessmann, bishop of the 3.3-million-member Evangelical Lutheran Church of Hanover, is timely also: 'The future belongs to the non-violent, or we have no future'.*

*Sentiments like these are not new to the church. In fact, the case for the churches working together to outlaw war goes back some distance along Lutheran rails to Fanø, Denmark. There, in 1934, Lutheran theologian (and later, martyr) Dietrich Bonhoeffer stunned his hearers when he said that 'Christians can't direct weapons against one another because they know that in doing so they are directing them at Christ himself!'*

*Bonhoeffer marks a turning point. In his writings Protestant politics changes from a 'matter of order and obedience to a responsible task'. He claimed that, while the individual church can witness and suffer, 'only the one great Ecumenical Council of the holy church of Christ over all the world can speak out, so that the world, though it gnash its teeth, will have to hear, so that the peoples will rejoice because the church of Christ in the name of Christ has taken the weapons from the hands of their sons, forbidden war, proclaimed the peace of Christ against the raging world'. Having wandered away-some would say 'having sleepwalked through history'-are we now being driven back to this position?*

*The current crisis should be leading Lutherans to look to their roots. For, as Lutheran theologian Prof Peter Brunner says,*



Luther was the first to uphold insistently the principle which, only much later, became a constituent part of the law of nations via the UN Charter, namely, that only self-defence against an actual attack constitutes legitimate use of violence in the form of war. 'The attack, on the other hand, is in every case, a fundamental violation of international law', claimed Brunner. Lutherans, of all people, should be taking the UN Charter seriously. In 1961 Brunner wrote that the direction for humanity's dealing with the war problem is clearly indicated by the UN Charter, especially so for any student of Luther.

Blatant, dangerous talk about 'pre-emption' must be brought into this light by Christians, especially by Lutherans. According to the Augsburg Confession 16, we may 'engage in just wars', but certainly not in just any wars, which means, I would say, not in most wars. Brunner reads Luther as follows: 'The assurance of political and military leaders that the war is just is in no way sufficient. Whoever does military service must investigate this question himself (sic)'. Are Lutheran people aware of this?

It is a real concern that these Lutheran-compatible positions, so obviously relevant to our world and to survival, are not widely known or preached, taught or discussed. Perhaps some are well informed, and many church leaders have indeed spoken out clearly in the current crisis (also the National Council of Churches, under good Lutheran influence). But Ashcroft, Rumsfeld, Rice, Howard [= Australia's Prime Minister] and Bush, and many mainline Methodist, Lutheran and other people in the Western world give the impression that Christianity has no problem with war as such.

To many in the Muslim world, Bin Laden is a man fighting for justice. For many Muslims, the impression that Christians have no problem with war simply reinforces their memory of the



suffering inflicted by the medieval Crusades. Thus the name of Christ is defamed. The gates of mission narrow. I dare say, too, that relations with the world's largest Islamic and so fragile nation at our front door, Indonesia, are undermined by talk of a pre-emptive strike. Perhaps the huge anti-war rallies of the past weeks save face for us somewhat.

But why should we be content to leave the protests to the hippies and the students? Should not the church be taking the lead? During all the years of peace the church's teaching and living never really addresses-consistently, audibly and intentionally-the horrible issue of war. Bishops should veto the sending of our young to fight on foreign shores; this nation is not under attack. This is especially so, given that we have a propensity to fight every war some powerful friend asks us to. And then we make a cult of the dead on Anzac Day [the day of Australia's most bloody defeat in World War I], meanwhile caring most meagrely for the injured and the wives and families left to bear their losses.

War is a last resort; otherwise, it is unthinkably obscene. What, then, holds us back-we who are grateful for every day of peace and the amazing 'luck' of the draw, being born in this 'lucky country'? What restrains us from being more vocal and up-front, fomenting not revolt but utter abhorrence of war? Indeed, are we not biased deeper down, bound to be partisan followers of the Non-Violent Crucified from Nazareth?

The old century saw an average of a hundred human beings die in warfare every hour. A shocking statistic, yet unable to measure the agony. In this new century, all assumptions are up for grabs. It is our young people who are always most directly concerned with the crisis of war. With our fine schools the challenge of teaching a different ethos and political culture is surely manageable. Let it be based foursquare in the



*Christian ethic. This would add a reality-and-religion-related dimension to the curriculum-critical, exciting and hopeful. It may, pray God, just save us from breaking last century's deadly records.*

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## **Shock and Awe—at the Power of Death or the Power of Life?**

Colleagues,

Amy Thoren is the seminary intern this year at our congregation here in St. Louis. But only half-time. The other half of her internship is with the Lutheran Campus Ministry here in town. Amy is something else! Not only is she amiable; she's awesome—especially when it comes to knowing the Gospel and then proclaiming it when it's her turn in the pulpit. She even knows how to parse “awe,” that term now secularized—actually demonized—in public rhetoric in the USA. I say “demonized” because there is no God-quotient left in the term as our leaders tell us what “we” are trying to do to the Iraqis. We're told that the goal is to render the enemy “awe-struck” about us and our military muscle. God gets robbed of his proprietary rights to the term. If that is indeed the case, you know who is in trouble—with God! Au contraire Amy. Amy knows how to parse awe. How else, but via law and Gospel? That itself is awesome—and rare in preaching these days. Seems to me—as Henry Higgins said of Liza Doolittle—“I think she's got it.” See the evidence below.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder



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## **Sermon on Laetare, Fourth Sunday in Lent**

**March 30, 2003**

**by Amy Thoren**

**Epistle: Ephesians 2.1-10**

**Gospel: John 3.14-21**

*Two men are shown mercy. In Victor Hugo's Les Misérables, Jean Valjean steals precious silver owned by a priest who gives him a room for a night. After being caught and brought back to the priest's home, the priest lies to the police by telling them he gave Valjean the silver. Valjean is set free and appropriately shocked by the mercy shown him. He changes his life so drastically that he takes on a new identity and sets about looking for ways to serve his society. Javert, an upright officer of the law who has been looking for Valjean for years, becomes a spy in the French revolution. He is discovered but then set free by the very one he has been hunting. Javert is so shocked by this act of senseless mercy, so overwhelmed by his own guilt, that he takes his own life.*

*Two men are shown mercy. But notice how differently they react to the mercy shown them. Neither is condemned for his actions. Both are shocked and awed by the greatness of the gift. But while one man's life becomes truly life, the other can't accept the gift and chooses death instead.*

*Shock and Awe. It is a potent image, and the pictures on the news these days are intimidating. They do make me tremble and shudder. They show off our immense capabilities, and they impress upon me how fragile we are, and how fragile our environment is. Certainly this is the kind of shock and awe our administration is after.*



*At the Wednesday evening Lenten service last week Pastor Yancey spoke of the shock and awe he feels at the courage of so many to face these times, the courage to actually put your life on the line. This is life and death for so many people.*

*[Info interlude by EHS: As part of her campus ministry work Amy took a group of students to Germany during their spring break a week ago. The goal: to encounter church life and campus ministry there. Amy herself recently studied theology in Munich for a year. So she knows the territory.]*

*In Germany last week we visited a memorial to a small group of students who engaged in passive resistance to Hitler. They were caught passing out leaflets against the Nazi party and beheaded for it. And our students asked, What would I have done? Would I have had the courage to do the same thing? The willingness to risk and to lose one's life is nothing less than awesome courage.*

*I've been thinking about Shock and Awe in another way. In my very profound struggle to know how to preach in these times, I must ask you, my brothers and sisters in Christ, is it really shocking that humanity is once again up to the business of destruction? Given our history on earth, are we really shocked that tyrants still rule in our world? Is it really awe-some that peace is being sought by means of war? And that violence continues to breed more violence? These are new actors, space, and time, but the drama is not so different. To top it all off, players on nearly every side seem to have God backing them up. It's really nothing new. I am not shocked, still less am I in awe. I mourn and grieve for soldier and civilian alike, as already at home and abroad so many do.*

*And in the midst of all the talk and shows of power of dictators and well-intentioned presidents alike, I fear that*



*the power of the cross of Christ gets lost. When it should shock and awe us.*

*Indeed God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.*

*Author Annie Dillard has been quoted umteen times in sermons. She writes, "On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? . . . It is madness to wear ladies' hats and straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets! Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return."*

*Picture this in your head and have a good laugh. But hear in it a great truth! The power of the gospel to change hearts and recreate us in the image of God should blow us out of our seats! This is shock and awe. That God so loved this world. That God would come into this warring world – into this world of darkness and sin. That God would choose not to be isolated from us, from our constant abuse of power, that God would choose not to be isolated from our pain and suffering at the hands of the abusers of power. That God would choose not to hole up in some sanctuary, apart from evil and danger. That Jesus would rather so intimately touch the reality of this world, even when it put him in danger. And the even more shocking punch line. That God in Christ would choose not to condemn this warring world. That Jesus would come with life and healing rather than condemnation. This should shock the pants off of us. God has drawn us out to where we can never return.*



*We are not condemned! And may we react by choosing life like Valjean rather than death like Javert. We are not condemned, we are set free. This freedom cannot be granted by any government; this is what allowed pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer to claim to be free even when imprisoned and later put to death by the Nazis. We who were dead are now made alive, we are already free in Christ. But it's not a freedom to do whatever we want. It is freedom for love. Ephesians says we are made alive with Christ and created in Christ Jesus for a purpose, for good works.*

*The shock and awe of the cross is not what we expect. It is precisely opposite the powers of the world that flash across our TVs these days, and so the cross looks like weak resignation. That God could suffer and die – that the messiah would be crucified rather than insisting on political victory – these ideas didn't sit well with either Greek or Jew. And they can't possibly sit well with any politician today who confuses earthly power with heavenly power. In the middle of so many rulers' claims to God, let us speak of what we know. God's plans for the world have far more to do with the love shown to us on the cross than with any one political system on this earth. And God's love is not bound to any one nation, for God so loved the world. God's salvation reveals love that will not lash out in condemnation and fear, but that is willing to suffer and die. Brothers and sisters in Christ, may we all be shocked and awed by the power of the cross! You are not condemned! You have been given the power to become children of God. You are set free in Christ and so you are free indeed. This is not your own doing nor the doing of any government, so that no one may boast – you have been saved by grace. For we are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, for love and mercy and healing and life. Amen.*

*Amy Thoren*



*Lutheran Campus Ministry*  
*Seminary Intern*  
*2002-2003*